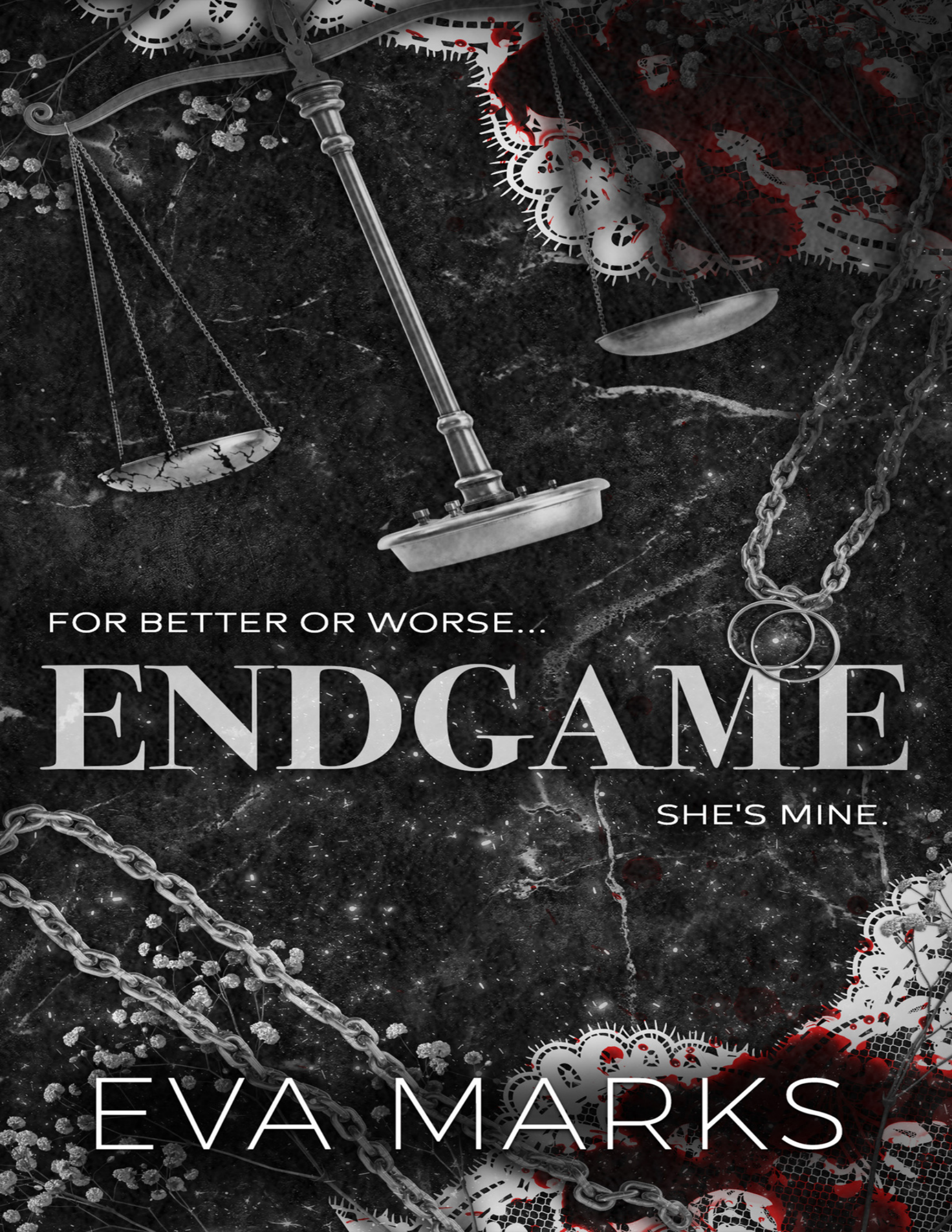
FOR BETTER OR WORSE...
ENDGAME
SHE'S MINE.
EVA MARKS

ENDGAME

EVA MARKS

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Endgame is a dark, steamy romance.
It contains explicit, disturbing, and graphic scenes and kinks intended for mature audiences only.

Full list of trigger warnings, content warnings and kinks can be found on my website www.evamarkswrites.com.

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DEDICATION

To everyone who dreamed about an emotionally unavailable, morally gray man calling them "my wife"…
This one's for you.

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PLAYLIST

Ursine Vulpine ft. Annaca — “Wicked Game”
Halsey — “Control”
Nine Inch Nails — “Hurt”
Ethel Cain — “Punish”
Jane Remover — “Contingency Song”

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ABOUT THE BOOK

When I married my enemy's daughter, I didn't do it out of love.
I did it so I could hurt her.

Her father destroyed my family. Aurora Clarke was the key to destroying his.
I watched the reckless heiress from afar, a predator hunting his prey.
Saw her get arrested, then locked up.
Strike one. Strike two.
When the inevitable third came, I made sure I was the judge assigned to her case.
Behind closed doors, I gave her two choices. Either years in prison…or marrying me.
She was wrong to choose me.
And me, I was dead wrong about her.
Now that she's mine, I see it all.
Her pain. The damage that was done to her.
The scars no one ever bothered to look for.
The people responsible *will* pay for it.

Because no one, and I mean no one, touches *my wife*.

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PROLOGUE

Everett
Twenty-three years ago

A groan rises in my throat. I swallow it down. Clench my fists. Hold it all in.

I'm trying to stay calm—I really am—but I'll lose my mind if I stay in my room for another second.

The room itself isn't the problem. And no, even though I'm eighteen, I'm not itching to get out of here and go to college.

College means nothing to me.

Nothing does, ever since someone brutally raped Lotus, my fifteen-year-old adopted sister, two months ago.

And because she made me swear not to tell anyone for now, the only thing I can do to help is sleep on the floor beside her bed every night. I'm always careful to slip out before sunrise so our parents don't find out.

They'd ask too many questions.

Questions she isn't ready for yet.

And though she usually trusts me and wants me there, tonight, she asked me to stay away.

Why?

I pace my room, running my hand through my hair.

What’s so different about tonight?

She’s in pain, same as always. I saw it on her face earlier.

She’s still a shadow of herself, wandering aimlessly around the house. Still pulling on her hair, still not touching her meals. She won’t even poke at them with her fork.

Just stares through them, blankly.

Our parents have noticed the change. Of course they have.

Her sad blue eyes are impossible to ignore.

They keep asking her, *What’s wrong, Lotus? Please, talk to us. We love you.*

Every time I hear her repeat the same excuses, my teeth gnash.

Stress. School. Too many projects and tests. It’ll be over soon though. I’ll be fine.

Lies.

Without real help, she won’t be fine.

Real help *and* justice.

I can’t give her either, for the time being, since she’s freaked out about me confronting her rapist and making a scene. So freaked out she won’t tell me who it was.

The only two details she shared were that he was part of the secret society our parents belong to, Royalty, and that he wasn’t one of the adults.

I ruled out Stafford, my best friend, right away. I was with him that night. Thank fuck for small favors.

That leaves three suspects. First two are Arnold and Maverick, Stafford’s brothers. Then there’s Winston Clarke.

Without any hard proof or her confession, it’ll be impossible to figure out which one of them raped her.

Avenging her is impossible, even if I want to.

And I do.

Another groan vibrates through me, threatening to come out. The frustrated sound has accompanied me since I saw her bleeding on her bed.

It’s one that I’ve been suppressing in favor of soft smiles and holding her hand.

Just for a bit longer, she begs me whenever I urge her to go to our parents. *Mom and Dad would be so embarrassed. I was so stupid, Everett. So stupid to fall for him. I need a few more days for myself, and then I’ll tell them. I won’t cry as much when they say it was my fault.*

It wasn’t her fault. I know it in my bones. If she’d just talk to Mom and Dad, they’d tell her the same thing.

I repeated it to her until my voice turned raw. It never seems to sink in. The fact that she won’t come forward, that she’s too scared or ashamed, makes me want to scream or cry or both.

That night—that goddamn night—warps the truth in her head. Pain turns the truth into a vicious lie. It convinces her that we’d stop loving her.

“Dammit.” I land a punch on the bed instead of the wall, where I’d like to hit. I’m trying to be quiet. Considerate.

I unload a second punch on my bed. That one’s because she’s in pain.

The third is for every tear she’s shed over the last two months.

The last one is because she won’t let me sit beside her. I’m fucking useless.

All this rage, I’m being consumed by it.

Now I definitely can’t go in there. Barging into her sacred space while I’m shaking with barely contained rage isn’t an option I’m willing to entertain.

For the slightest chance that it might trigger her, I stay put. Breathing hard. Calming myself down.

Thinking. Thinking. *Thinking*.

Until she lets me in, what do I do? How can I help her?

Get revenge.

That’s it. That’s what I’ll do.

Once I figure out who hurt her…

I’ll make him pay for this.

“Who did it?” I ask the empty room. “Who?”

I’ve been racking my brain for weeks.

Whoever he was, this asshole was enough of a monster to hold her down in the shower and wash the evidence off her.

He watched her bleed even after the water stopped running. Warned her to stay quiet. That it’d be her word against his.

That was how I found her that night. She’d left her bedroom door unlocked, and I went in to ask for her charger.

I forgot about the charger the second I saw her bleeding all over her sheets, sobbing and shaking uncontrollably.

I told her, again and again, that I believed her.

It still wasn’t enough to convince her to come forward.

If Dad knew, he'd make her say that fucker's name. Then he'd strangle him with his bare hands.

Or he'd avenge her the right, lawful way. His way. Dad's law firm is the biggest one in Boston. In all of the East Coast, to be exact.

He'd get her the justice she's owed.

If she'd only talk to our parents.

She will. Be it tonight or tomorrow, she will.

The rapist's carefree days, as he knows them, are over.

"Can't take it anymore." Newfound determination is the force pushing me out of my room. In a matter of seconds, I'm standing outside of hers.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to soften my expression.

There's no one in the dimly lit hallway to see me clenching and unclenching my fists.

Mom and Dad went to bed hours ago. The staff is done for the day.

Deep breath.

For her. I'm doing this for her.

Another deep breath.

Stupid breathing techniques.

They're useless. How am I supposed to keep breathing through this? Through the anger that's been bottled up inside me for two months?

My shirt and flannel pants are too tight on my skin. The pounding in my head is a beating drum. An incessant thrumming.

I run a hand through my hair again, tugging on the strands.

The internal pain won't go away.

I have to take a few more steadying breaths before I go in there.

My adopted sister deserves better. She's owed a calm big brother who'd reassure her no one's going to un-adopt her or whatever the hell is going through her tormented brain.

After what has to be my tenth inhale, I knock on her door.

Quiet. She isn't treading toward the door. Not asking me in her hushed voice, *Everett? Is that you?*

She couldn't have fallen asleep.

Without me there to watch over her, Lotus can't sleep. She doesn't stop crying.

I knock again. "Lotus?"

The silence grows louder, if possible.

My gut churns. I press my ear to the door. Strain to hear her bedsheets shuffling as she turns over in her four-poster canopy bed.

I pray for the sound. For any sign of life.

Or…maybe she's okay. Maybe tonight isn't as bad for her. Maybe she has her earphones on and is listening to her favorite playlists.

Yeah, right.

"Lotus?" Done with waiting, I cover my eyes with one hand, turn the knob, and step inside. "Lotus, are you decent?"

This silence. It's loud. It's static in my ears, like something terrible is about to happen.

More than it already has.

Dread lines the bottom of my stomach. She could've passed out, and I'm standing here like an idiot.

She could also be naked, so I keep my hand over my eyes.

"Lotus?" I square my shoulders, standing taller. Straighter.

For her. I think the sight of her six-foot-three brother calms my sister. A shield between her and the outside world.

I don't remind her that I failed when it mattered. What I do is bulk up at the gym.

"Hey, so, you're freaking me out. What's—" *What's wrong, dumbass? Really?* "Lotus, I'm going to count to five, then I'm taking my hand off my eyes, okay?"

Despite my rising concern and my chest tightening, I make good on my promise and count.

"…and five." Removing my hand, I look around her room.

She hasn't fallen asleep on top of the white covers. Hasn't collapsed on the floor either.

There's no sign of her on her couch by her heavy wood desk, but in her bathroom, she might be there.

"Hey, you there?" I rap on the door with my knuckles. "Let me in. Please."

I want her to tell me to go away. To leave her alone.

Anything but this silence. Silence means she could've passed out from crying.

Or she could've broken down and harmed herself.

My hand is heavy as I turn the knob, as heavy as my heart when I push the door in.

“Hey.”

No answer. The vanity and waterfall shower are as silent as the rest of Lotus’s room.

“Fuck.”

All my frustration piles up in that one curse.

All my sadness.

I see what I look like in her vanity mirror. My gray eyes are fucking weird. I’ve never been this frustrated in my life.

This helpless.

Her closet, maybe. In three steps, I’m inside, flipping the lights on.

Expensive clothes and shoes are lined on the shelves and hang from the racks. Lotus doesn’t care about these things, but Mom loves spoiling her.

Mom loves spoiling all three of us.

Except she isn’t here now. Neither is Lotus.

Where could she be? She hasn’t left the room since dinner.

Could *he* have taken her?

No.

No.

No.

I put a hand over my throat, massaging the area.

Think, idiot.

I’m pacing again, just like Dad does before he has a big case and isn’t sure which line of defense to take.

Since he’s the person I idolize the most, and I’m basically a carbon copy of him, I do just that. Pace Lotus’s room. Over and over and over.

Before I give up and go wake Mom and Dad, I pause at her desk and frown. There’s a folded piece of paper I must’ve missed earlier.

In her handwriting, it reads: *Mom, Dad, and Everett*.

Bile rises in my throat. This can’t be good.

I unfold it anyway.

Hi, fam.

First and foremost, I love you. Over fifteen years ago, you let me into your home. I was no more than a few days old, and you already claimed me as yours.

Throughout the years, you’ve shown me what true love and family are all about.

You've held me through the bad times, laughed with me in the good ones. You've always been patient and caring, and again, I love you for it.

That's why it breaks my heart to say that I can't stay.

See, something happened. Something really bad that you wouldn't like. Now that I'm gone, Everett will fill you in on it. It hurts too much to repeat it, even on paper.

I'm sorry about that. For ruining everything.

For putting myself in a position that, in turn, puts you *in a difficult position.*

But don't worry. I'm fixing whatever it is I broke. You don't have to worry about anything. Once I'm gone, you won't have to choose between me and the Royalty. I know what your group of friends and business connections mean to you.

This is how I get to pay you for the love you've given me.

I love you. I miss you already.

Thank you for being the family I never deserved.

Lotus.

My heart, my ribcage, my insides—they're crushed. Turned to dust.

"No." I crumple the piece of paper and fling it at the wall.

My next victim is the wastebasket by her desk. I kick it, watching the contents spill over her rug.

Among a few crumpled papers, two plastic sticks stand out.

Both have a small digital screen in the center.

"What the hell?"

I drop to my knees to take a better look, because no. It can't be what I think it is.

It is.

Up close, there's no denying it.

Pregnant.

Lotus is pregnant.

My breath catches. The word echoes in my skull, refusing to make sense, refusing to settle. I feel like the ground beneath me has shifted.

She's pregnant and out there.

Alone.

With every ounce of energy I have left in my body, I sprint to our parents' bedroom.

Together, we'll find her and her baby.

We'll save them both if she decides to keep it.
We will.

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1

AURORA

TWENTY-THREE YEARS LATER—PRESENT DAY

Being twenty-two and locked up like a damn prisoner has to be the biggest joke ever.

Wait, no. It's not a joke. It's my life, being trapped in a cage disguised as a home.

Every now and then, though, they crack the door open. Then, on the rare occasions I'm actually allowed out of this mansion from hell, it's never real freedom. There's always a security detail breathing down my neck the second I step outside.

Unless I outsmart them. Which I do, much to my adoptive parents' dismay.

Shoplifting is my rebellion. It's how I pay them back for the constant abuse they put me through at home.

Since I'm only allowed on shopping trips—always far enough away that I won't run into my parents' acquaintances—I spend hours pretending to browse. Once I'm ready, when no one's paying attention, I shove clothes or whatever I can find into my bag. Not to run away, but to get caught.

The only time my parents even agree to let me out of here is when I scream at the top of my lungs for hours.

Sure, they could silence me forever by locking me in the basement and throwing away the key.

But if I died there, in their home, they'd have a lot of explaining to do, filthy rich or not. Besides, they have other plans for me.

Mom’s plan isn’t an obvious one. I just think she wants me dead. Whenever I leave the house, I get the feeling she hopes I’ll be kidnapped or end up in a car crash that finally takes me out. I see it in the way she watches me when I leave the house—calm, smirking. Hopeful.

She’d never admit it. Never tell Dad. Because she’d never go against his wishes, and his depraved, fucked-up idea of a wish is marrying me off.

He can’t do that if I’m dead.

Besides, if I’m dead, they’d have a lot of explaining to do.

I hang my head in defeat, eyes fixed on the plush white rug in my bedroom. Not that the cops would care. Not my nonexistent friends. I was never allowed to go to school, college, or work.

The staff here doesn’t give a damn about me either.

My only hope is my parents’ rich asshole friends, the secret group they call Royalty. They’ve seen me about a dozen times in my life. Though it’s not much, they’d notice if I suddenly stopped showing up to the mandatory once-a-year meeting.

The one my parents make me go to prove that I’m alive.

The other families’ kids are there all the time, attending the bi-monthly meetings everyone’s obligated to. At least, that’s what I overheard Mom say.

It’s not like I’d ever know it from talking to them.

Other than common courtesy, I’m not allowed to talk to anyone from the other three families.

But I do know a little about them. That information, too, I’ve gathered from overhearing my parents.

There are the Bernards, who own one of the largest media conglomerates in the country. The Hales, who run a PR firm that spins for celebrities, politicians, and billionaires, keeping their secrets close, and using them as leverage when the time is right.

And the Alders. Or really, the Alder.

Everett Alder. Hot. Silent. Impossible to read. He stepped down from one of the most powerful law firms in the country—the same firm that’s been representing me since I started getting arrested—to become a judge at thirty-two.

So, no, I don’t see him when I go over there.

When I do catch a glimpse of him at the Royalty meetings, I can’t help myself. I stalk him. The man with the most gorgeous thick brown hair that’s

cut short on the sides, longer on top, barely speaks to anyone besides Stafford Hale.

The rest of us get nothing but scowls. His gray eyes are cold. Cruel. I like how sharp he seems.

A ripple of nerves runs through me when his intense gaze lands on me.

He terrifies me and turns me on simultaneously.

I wish…*sigh*. Wishing is pointless.

Mom and Dad will always make sure that I'm back here, no matter what. They smooth it over. Quiet it down. When their bribes work on the police, the store owners, the courts, I'm out before sunrise.

They failed twice. Only twice have I been found guilty and sentenced to serve time in prison.

Maybe this time, they'll fail too. Or I'll be back here. In this hell.

You know what? Fuck it.

I shake off every depressing thought and force a smile, one that feels more like a grimace. Then I look out the window at the sprawling lawns outside my bedroom. The gardens are perfectly manicured. The skies are clear and a gorgeous shade of blue.

Unlike my parents' faces, which must be crimson red while they wait for me outside. The color of hate that they wear so well, especially on court days.

I hate them just as much.

Ugh. Please, God, if you're up there, let me lose this case today. Let them sentence me to a few days inside, or even a couple of months. Anything other than being here.

"Aurora Coraline Clarke," my mother screams.

I slap a hand over my mouth before she hears me gasp, scolding myself for the knee-jerk reaction.

She jiggles my door's handle, huffing exasperatedly to find it locked. "You better be ready in ten, or else."

Fuck her and her tyranny. My time here might be limited, but if all I've got is this last chance to piss her off, I'll take it.

Let her feel a fraction of the pain she's caused me. All those days in the basement. Of being seconds from losing my mind.

She's earned this little rebellion. Without telling her I've been ready for the past hour, I walk over to the full-body mirror on the other side of my bedroom, passing my antique sofa on my ridiculous black heels.

“Aurora!”

“I’ll be there.” My teeth knock together. I won’t let her hear it in my voice.

“As in now.”

“Go to hell,” I whisper, and turn to the mirror where I focus on my reflection and not that witch.

My chocolate-brown hair is twisted into a bun at my nape.

My makeup is minimalistic yet immaculate. Nothing more than thick mascara to frame my light blue eyes and a neutral lipstick to match my cream-colored skirt suit.

Mom bangs on the door. “You’re taking too long!”

“Says who?” I taunt her, forcing a grin onto my face.

I’m not to blame for this. For losing my mind. For trying to get back at my parents every chance I get.

It’s their fault. They’re the reason I’m like this.

They made me this way. My criminal track record—the reason every wealthy, influential man turns them down—is all because they forced my hand.

Not that I’d ever let them marry me off, no matter how much I hear them conspiring about it around the house. I’d slit my parents’ throats and the groom’s before anyone ever puts a ring on me.

I fucking dare them.

I might’ve been reduced to a shadow of a woman who rarely fights and talks back, but enough is enough.

Even if it means marrying some stranger is my ticket out of here, I won’t bend over backwards just so they’ll be happy.

Besides, there’s no doubt, whomever they choose for me, will be just as sadistic, as evil as they are.

He definitely won’t be the man I dream about late at night.

“Says me.” My dad, Winston, tries the handle as well. His blue eyes, which remind me of mine, must be boring holes into the door. “Let’s get this over with already. I have meetings to attend, business to run. My world doesn’t revolve around you, Aurora.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I whisper.

I wish he’d forgotten I existed altogether. That he’d let me out of this mansion.

I would’ve gone to college. I would’ve gotten a job.

Or I would've done neither.

It should be my choice. It isn't.

From the day my mother left me on this couple's doorstep with nothing but a thank you note, I've never had a single choice. None.

THE RIDE to the courthouse was uneventful, primarily thanks to my parents' absence.

Turns out, my guardian angel decided to show up for once.

Mom's aunt tripped down the stairs and was rushed to the hospital.

Since appearances are the only thing that matter to Winston and Molly, they took another car to visit her there.

I should probably feel bad, and yet all I can muster is relief.

Without them looming over every word and breath, I feel a sliver more human, sitting here, in this bench trial, next to one of the most expensive defense attorneys in the country, Larry Nelson.

Surprisingly, he isn't one of our usual lawyers.

Every associate and partner at Alder's firm has been too busy to take my case, which leaves me with Larry.

Weird, considering they have a shit ton of people working there.

But what do I know?

Basically nothing.

Not just about Alder's firm. What used to be his, anyway.

I'm talking about law. Life. Everything.

My tutors stopped showing up after I got my high school diploma through homeschooling. I don't have access to textbooks.

The ones I bought at the mall were tossed in the trash the minute I got home.

God forbid I get educated. God forbid I form my own opinion about anything.

Sigh.

Other than Larry, my security detail lingers near the rear exit, eyes sharp and posture tense.

The rest of the court is bustling with people waiting to appear before the judge today.

She’s a beautiful woman, her gray hair cut in an immaculate bob that frames a sharp face. Her blue eyes hold the kind of authority that makes people sit straighter.

“Judge is an old friend from law school,” my attorney reminds me of his connections. Boasting, really. “You’re looking at the bare minimum here, if she doesn’t throw this case out entirely.”

Minimum, as in three months at most, with a third deducted for good behavior.

Sigh.

I could really use something like, what? Six months inside?

Six months with other inmates who aren’t my parents. At least around them, I’m an equal. That’s always a breath of fresh air.

“Aurora?” His emerald-green eyes narrow, his breath smelling of stale cigarettes.

“Cool.” As inconspicuously as possible, I scoot away from him. “Thanks.”

He gives me a brisk nod. “You’re up next.”

“Great.” I smooth my suit jacket. My skirt. “Let’s get this over with.”

Bam, the judge bangs her gavel. The defendant and the attorney before me leave the courtroom, while the Assistant District Attorney remains seated.

The judge meets my attorney’s gaze.

My name should be called any second now.

“Judge Tucker.” A bailiff storms in from one of the side doors, rushing toward her. “I have a message for you.”

Her lips pinch, the corners of her forehead creasing with how hard she’s frowning.

My attorney, on the other hand, straightens his spine. The smirk on his face is a reflection of his cockiness.

Despite the judge’s confusion, Larry’s demeanor could only mean one thing—he trusts that my parents managed to close this case while we’ve been waiting here.

Disappointment tastes bitter in my mouth. A soft groan escapes me, and my gaze drops to my lap. To my clenched fists.

“Who gave you this order?” the judge asks. We sit close enough that I hear her hushed voice. “This is the first I’m hearing of this.”

“It was…” the plaintiff murmurs a name I don’t catch.

While they continue their conversation, a strange sensation arises in me.

Someone's watching me.

This isn't the first time I've felt this way.

The first time happened when I was on my last shoplifting mission a month ago. Minutes before I got arrested.

Something wasn't right that day, same as it is now.

My senses whisper that something worse is in the works. I'm being stalked and someone's conspiring against me.

That would explain the bailiff's abrupt entry and the man in black in the retail store who stole glances at me the entire time I was there. I swear he ratted me out.

Back then, I had no proof.

I have no proof of any wrongdoing now either.

But I feel it.

"Okay, then." The judge's chair scratches. Her heels clink on the wooden floor as she walks out.

A door opens and slams.

I keep staring at my lap. Keep praying that my gut is wrong about this.

The air shifts the moment someone enters, and it's like a current crawling across my skin.

The door to the courtroom closes behind the person with a quiet, final click. Their footsteps echo. They're slow, deliberate.

"Oh, this is good." I hear my attorney. "This is better than good."

His pleased tone piques my curiosity. Ignoring the warning bells in my head, I lift my gaze and freeze.

What?

What?

No way.

Everett Alder.

Judge Everett Alder.

One of his former lawyers isn't here, but he is.

What's he doing here anyway? And how, just by existing, does he take my breath away?

While I stare, I forget about everything else and get lost in him.

He's gorgeous, lean, and radiates power.

That scruff around his full lips is mouthwatering. His short brown hair only makes it worse, neat in a way that makes me want to mess it up with

my fingers.

The fact that he's got nineteen years on me and is unattainable makes me want him even more.

But when his piercing gray eyes catch mine, my fluttering heart twists. It feels like it almost crumbles.

Because he isn't looking at me. He's glowering.

He's angrier than I've ever seen him. With me?

No, he can't be.

He doesn't know me. I haven't done anything to get this kind of reaction out of him.

Mom and Dad must've done something to get under his skin more than usual.

Probably called him on their way to the hospital, talked his ear off, begged him to pull strings on my behalf.

That's got to be it.

"Miss Clarke." His bass voice rumbles through the room, snuffing out every whisper. "When you're ready."

Larry clears his throat, about to say something. Probably a comment about how we're here and yes, we're ready.

"As in, this second." Everett's eyebrows lower, his jaw clenching as he dismisses my lawyer before he can get a word in.

His order is as sharp and painful as a whip. My attorney and I are quick to stand and take our places behind the defendant's table.

As we lower ourselves into our seats, something about Everett's posture gives off a *don't get too comfortable* vibe.

I don't know what to make of it. What to make of him.

What I do know is that I'm attracted to him.

Despite myself, his scorn does the opposite of scaring me.

My thighs squeeze together. Heat rushes through my body. The strange fluttering in my belly is totally inappropriate for this situation.

Except I can't tear my eyes off the black robe and the way it drapes over his broad shoulders.

I never thought that would happen. My hatred of authority has been festering for as long as I can remember. I've spent my entire life being bossed around by my adoptive parents. I've resented every second of it.

Everett, though… I want him to boss me around, just so I could fight him. Just so he could win and bend me to his will.

Bend me over, period.

I've never done that for anyone else. For him, I would.

He clears his throat, sharp and deliberate, dragging my attention to him like a hook under my skin.

His expression shifts too. Less furious, more primal and personal. There's disgust in it, yes, but beneath it…something deeper.

Something that makes me shiver.

And he's quiet.

Deadly quiet.

"Judge Alder." Larry is all smiles. His leather briefcase is right there on the table, untouched. He's confident it's an open-and-shut case, and well, so am I. "If it pleases the court, my client would like to—"

"That won't be necessary."

Everett's tone shreds me from the inside out.

I don't think he's on my side.

Quite the opposite.

I was wrong before. This isn't about my parents.

He's mad at me.

This isn't a sexy kind of anger anymore either. He won't be bending me over anything.

If looks could kill, there'd be nothing left of me but dust.

Why, though?

I gulp around the lump in my throat. The pads of my fingers press to the edge of the table, white-knuckled. Sweat beads at the back of my neck.

God, I'm so terribly exposed to him.

"I'm sorry, Your Honor." Larry's brow furrows, his confidence diminishing. I sneak a glance at the ADA. She's looking between the judge and us, just as lost by the turn of events. "What do you mean, exactly?"

"Mr. Nelson." Everett leans forward.

A murmur ripples through the room as tension stretches taut. He's no longer just a judge behind a bench. He's a loaded weapon.

To my shame, I want more of it.

"Since you and I know each other from way back…" Everett's sardonic tone is awful. "I won't be wasting your time."

"I appreciate the gesture, but—"

Everett raises his hand. Larry clamps his mouth shut.

“Your client’s apology is redundant. Her impressive track record is proof of her blatant lack of remorse for shoplifting.”

My stomach sinks, embarrassment and fury crashing into each other. Why is he hellbent on humiliating me like this?

“I don’t see how a fake, teary-eyed apology is going to change any of that or *her*.”

He’s right, I won’t change. But every trial, I still repeat the same apology, or it’s another week in the basement for me.

“Please, if you will, my client has a few things she’d like to start by apologizing.”

“I see no use in wasting either the taxpayers’ money or the court’s time on your client.” There’s fire in Everett’s eyes.

A full-body tremble seizes me. My chest tightens, my stomach knots. A sharp chill skates down my spine like ice water in my veins. It’s like every muscle is trying to hold me together while my insides fall apart.

“Miss Clarke.”

I still myself, knowing nothing good is going to come out of this. Nothing at all.

“Starting today, you’ll be spending the rest of your life in prison, serving the sentence you so clearly deserve.”

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2

EVERETT

“Judge Alder.” Aurora’s lawyer jumps to his feet. My statement has taken him by surprise, so much so that he isn’t bothering to button his jacket. Is it fear for his reputation or his client’s freedom that turns his face pale? “Your Honor, if I may. This sentence, don’t you think it’s too harsh? We’re talking about shoplifting, not murder.”

A dark, warm satisfaction settles where my heart used to beat.

Yes, I am being harsh. I am being unreasonable.

And yes, I know, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, you can’t get life in prison for shoplifting. Not even when it’s your third strike.

I don’t give a damn. I don’t play by the rules. I have friends in high places who owe me a favor or a million. I can make almost anything happen.

That’s why I’m in this court in the first place.

Why I hired two corrupt private investigators to monitor Aurora’s moves. After her second stint in prison, I had them rotating shifts outside her home, waiting for her to go on another one of her infamous shopping sprees.

Their orders were simple. Follow her. Wait for her to shoplift. Alert the clerk that a thief is attempting to exit the store.

I could’ve done it after her first time behind bars, but even my connections can only get me so far.

So, here we are.

Me, overruling her case. Aurora, frozen and at my mercy. She doesn’t so much as blink.

A month or two in prison wouldn’t have bothered her in the slightest. She’s been there, done that.

The prospect of spending the rest of her life behind bars? No one’s immune to that.

Especially not spoiled, little, rich girls.

Her pink lips are parted. Delicate jaw slack.

A lock of her hair has escaped her immaculate bun, draping over one widened blue eye. She hasn’t bothered tucking it behind her ear.

Her button nose is as red as her cheeks and neck, evidence of the heat crawling beneath her skin, of the humiliation.

Satisfaction rolls through me like a fine, aged wine.

Blackmailing her is going to be easier than I thought it would be.

Soon, I’ll have her tears.

I’ll become the master of her fear. Own her troubled gaze. Those rapid heartbeats I hear all the way from my bench—they belong to me already.

She’s mine to ruin.

All three Clarkes are.

The family who destroyed mine. They’ll pay for everything. Only a matter of time.

For now, I have this. Her third strike and the discretion to impose a sentence well beyond what the statute typically recommends.

That’s the leverage I hold over her.

The noose I’ll tighten until she has no choice but to walk straight into the lion’s den.

Into becoming my wife.

My captive, if I’m being honest.

She’ll suffer. She’ll hurt.

I won’t.

Aurora is a gorgeous young woman. A temptation. When I fuck her, I’m going to enjoy myself.

But her breasts, her bitable lips, the swell of her hips, they’re nothing more than a perk.

I would’ve put her in this position even if I weren’t attracted to her.

Avenging my family is my endgame.

That’s what’s waiting for her.

Shame, really, that she's alone here. Her parents won't witness my plan as it unfolds. They'll hear about it later, though, and that's fine.

I'm in no rush.

I've been patient for the past twenty-three years.

For the first twelve years of those, my family and I had been looking for Lotus and her baby.

Then, one day, her remains were found. Her baby's weren't, though the coroner told us they must be out there since it was evident that Lotus had delivered her child.

The next day, Mom died of a heart attack, and a few weeks later, so did Dad. The doctors said their hearts just gave out for no apparent reason.

There was a reason, all right.

Grief.

It was then that I went to clear their home before selling it and getting rid of the devastating memories.

What I found there was equally heartbreaking.

Lotus's diary.

Heat courses through my body as I remember the words written in a shaky script.

I loved Winston Clarke, and he raped me.

I could've murdered Winston and been done with it. God knows I'm wealthy enough to cover my tracks.

Torturing him and his family far outweighs a quick death.

"Umm," Aurora starts, then snaps her mouth shut, her lips twisting.

Then she changes in front of me. Her thick lashes bat on soft cheeks as she blinks furiously. Rage that matches mine reflects in her expression.

Her chest heaves. Her breasts stretch against her expensive suit jacket.

I don't want her. Pure, feral attraction, that's all there is to it.

"Your Honor?" her attorney tries again.

Sticking to my silence, I terrorize both him and her for a while longer.

My eyes are locked on her blue ones. Aurora senses my hate growing, tugging on the collar of her blouse. She manages to be graceful despite her predicament.

"Shoplifting or not, she's crossed too many lines for too long. The law offers me discretion. I intend to use it to the fullest extent and beyond, if necessary." A fresh wave of resolve hardens my chest. "While the world's been content to look the other way, I will not."

“Your Honor, Sir.” Larry’s voice is lower. I hear it, regardless. The courtroom has been deadly silent since I announced Aurora’s sentence. Even the ADA stares at me, stunned. “May I approach the bench?”

The right answer to that would be *you may*.

Too bad whatever part of me that used to care about fairness got buried under decades of hate and grief.

“You may not.”

At that, Aurora’s eyebrows fly up. Her blue orbs sink their claws right into my soul, shutting out the audible gasps in the courtroom. No, I won’t give in and get lost in those ocean-blue eyes. I won’t.

What I do is make sure she sees I’m talking to her. “You, however.”

Sensing the challenge in my tone, her chin lifts. Jaw clenches.

Her attitude. It won’t get her anywhere with me. While I haven’t met her more than a handful of times, and only after my parents died, I know what she’s like.

Always keeping to herself. Quiet, resentful. Thinking she’s better than everyone else.

Considering our group, she probably is. Nevertheless, guilt by association is still guilt.

This look she’s giving me, though, is different from her usual contempt.

She’s readying herself for a fight.

So am I.

Tension coils through my arms beneath the suit, my sleeves stretching on my skin. The hand I have in my lap curls into a fist, my nails digging into my palm. I inch forward, narrowing my eyes.

“Me, what?” Christ, would you look at that? Winston would be proud of her derisive glower.

He wears it so. Fucking. Well.

I jerk my chin. “To my chambers.”

“Okay,” her lawyer says, not one of mine. I’ve had my family’s law firm partners decline to take her case this time. I might’ve quit my position there, but it’s clear to everyone who owns them. “Fair enough.”

They both get up.

“I thought I was being clear, Miss Clarke.” I dip my chin. “Only you.”

“Why?” Her voice sharpens, a little edge slipping through. “I’m entitled to have my lawyer present.”

I’d feel sorry for her, except this is what I’ve dreamed of. This moment. Her pain. The sliver of hope I’ll get to crush over and over again.

“Only you,” I repeat.

Her shoulders roll back like she’s trying to tower over her five-foot-three frame.

It won’t help her. Nothing will.

“Or else?” she says, a spark of defiance in her eyes.

The nerve of her.

How dare she lean in? How dare she cock an eyebrow, like we’re equals. Or worse. Like she’s above me.

No Clarke will ever rule over or intimidate an Alder. Never again.

Aurora will learn that first.

And she’ll learn it the hard way.

My revenge will leave its mark everywhere. On her skin and her soul.

“Or else you’ll be transferred to serve your sentence effective immediately.” My pulse is slow yet loud in my ears. “Matter of fact—”

“Fine, I’m coming,” she snaps, gathering her purse.

The thin strap goes over her shoulder. Her scornful side-eye to her attorney scalds him. He turns bright red, and I can’t decide if I’m impressed or annoyed.

To hell with both of them. I don’t spare either a glance as I stride out of the courtroom.

Aurora’s heels strike the marble floor of the secured corridor in hurried bursts as she scrambles to match my pace.

Her huffs and low curses are just as audible.

Brat.

She wouldn’t act like that if she knew how hard it makes me.

“Keep up,” I snap.

The clicking of her heels suggests she’s running. She’s at my side within seconds.

“I see what this is, your ultimatum. It has to be illegal. And…even if it isn’t, I won’t blow you in exchange for a reduced sentence.” Aurora’s venomous, yet her shame is present. Right beneath the surface. “I won’t.”

My lips curl into a snarl. “You think I want your petty thief’s lips anywhere near my cock?”

Of course the fuck I do. I’ll have it too.

“Then?”

When we enter my chambers, I wait for her to come inside and slam the door shut behind her.

Aurora yelps. I seize the opportunity to be a bigger asshole still, ripping the purse off her shoulder. Staring at her as I do.

Her cheeks are bright red with anger and shame as she watches me going through her belongings. “Give it back, asshole.”

“Be careful how you address me.” I pluck out her phone, throw it on the floor, and crush it beneath my shoe.

“What the fuck?” She does her best to still her shudders. Her fists are on her hips. Her jaw is clenched. Neither works. “You—well, okay. Fine. Destroy my phone. It’s not like I have outgoing phone calls, other than to my parents. Your *friends*, remember?”

My friends.

My. Fucking. Friends.

In two seconds flat, I throw her purse on the floor and crowd her space.

Step after step, she moves backward as I move forward.

Her stare dares me to cross another line. To fucking try her.

I’d be lying if I said the push and pull between us wasn’t stirring something primal in me, that I don’t take longer strides just to stay close.

Close enough to smell the fear beneath the fire.

Her back slams against the wall. Shadows play across her face as I flatten a hand next to her head. As I lower my face to hers.

What a sight.

Blown pupils. Quivering lips.

When she bites the bottom one, my whole body stands at attention.

“Your parents,” I hiss, my free hand curling around her neck. I give it a squeeze, getting off on her gasp. On the fear spilling from her blue eyes. “Are not my friends. *You* are not my friend.”

“But the Royalty—”

“Fuck the Royalty.”

My growl matches the violence vibrating through me. With my hand firm around her neck, I push her harder against the wall.

My thumb grazes over soft skin until…

There it is. Her pulse, fluttering beneath my thumb.

This little trapped and terrified butterfly.

Getting what she deserves. Like her parents do.

“You’re so scared of me.” I’m close enough to kiss her. “Aren’t you?”

“Fuck you, you psycho on a power trip.” Her hand rises to slap me.

“I’m not on a power trip.” I let go of the wall, wrestling both her wrists in one of my much larger hands. The only reason I release her throat is to slam both her arms over her head. “I am power.”

We both breathe hard. I get off on the sight of my fingers as they wrap around her throat again.

Once she’s mine, I’ll make sure she always walks around with a collar. Her wedding band will remind her of who she belongs to. The collar will serve a whole other purpose.

I give her a sense of what’s coming by grinding my hips into her. It’s so she’ll fear me. I want her to feel how big my cock is, to imagine how it’ll split her in half.

“What do you want?” Though her voice is gravelly, her attitude lingers.

She’s talking down to me, as if I’m the one who owes her something.

Ridiculous.

More ridiculous is the way I can’t look away if I wanted to.

I give her throat another squeeze, instantly relieved by the sound of Aurora’s whimper.

“What gives you the impression that you get to make demands?”

“You can’t do this.” She swallows, her throat bobbing beneath my palm. “I know my rights.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, princess. Starting today, you don’t have any.”

The tension between us is all wrong. It’s not the hatred I expected.

It’s something darker, hungrier.

A rush.

I hate that I’m heady with it.

My teeth gnash from the pressure forming in my head.

I chalk it off to the metaphorical mountain air I’m breathing in. I’m right there, at the peak. The pinnacle of my life’s goals.

“I do!”

She’s a feisty one. Breaking her down will be that much more fulfilling.

“You have *options*.” When I bring my face closer to hers, her breath quickens. She isn’t blinking. I don’t think I do either. “Two of them. Nothing more, nothing less.”

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3

EVERETT

"Well, good." Her eyes dart to the side, then back to me. She keeps worrying her bottom lip. "Everyone's always telling me what to do, so at least I have options. A choice. Guess there's a first time for everything."

She's blabbering, a panicked little thing, but I hear her, and the things she says give me pause.

This is the first time anyone's given her a choice? *Her?* The spoiled princess, raised with the world at her feet? All this time, and she's never had a say?

Given her family name and the mouth on her, I always assumed she had every option lying at her feet. That staying locked away in that mansion, living off her daddy's money, was the life she chose for herself. Either that, or shoplifting when the mood struck.

My eyebrows draw together in confusion.

Impossible. I couldn't have been wrong about her. About *them*.

The rumors circling about Aurora all sound the same…Winston treats her as his prized possession. Talks about her as if he loves her.

He tells every influential man who'll listen that they'll be lucky to marry his daughter. That merging their families will benefit both sides.

No, I wasn't wrong about her.

I silence the voices urging me to pity her. They have no room here. "Lying won't save you, princess."

Her nostrils flare, throat straining against my palm. "I wasn't lying."

“You weren’t?” Her act won’t fool me. “What about stealing? Or, let me guess, you have a twin I don’t know about?”

The red in Aurora’s cheeks is the darkest I’ve ever seen on a person. Her jacket stretches over her tits.

I adjust my knee to press between her legs, shoving her skirt up as I do until Winston’s daughter’s pussy is hot, pulsing against me.

She must be wet too.

When I lift my thumb to slide along her bottom lip, a small moan escapes her.

I’m going to use her arousal against her.

“Cat got your tongue?” I raise an eyebrow. More fury and shame roll off her in waves. I can almost taste them. “Thought so.”

“You’re a weak fucking loser for hurting me like this.”

As a punishment for talking back, I rub my knee over her pussy. Her skirt and my gown are restricting, but I’m persistent. I’m also hard as fuck. Dying to feel her.

“Homeschooling did wonders for your vocabulary.”

Our foreheads nearly touch. Her soft whimpers brush my lips like a dare.

“Fuck you,” she wheezes. Between panting and the hold I have on her throat, breathing can’t be easy. “Fuck. You. How’s that for my vocabulary, Your Honor? Or would you prefer *Your Majesty*?”

“You could call me that.” Proving just how much power I have over her, I pull up to my full height. I drive my knee harder into her cunt as I tilt her face up with my thumb. “When you write me letters from prison. When you rot in there for life. Either that, or I could dismiss the charges against you.”

“You would?”

My eyes eat up every inch of her face. Not because she’s beautiful. I want to remember this moment for the rest of my life. The moment I crushed a Clarke.

“Then you’d have to call me *your husband*.”

A gasp. A blank, confused stare.

The slowest pulse I’ve ever felt beneath my palm.

“What did you say?”

“You heard me.” Revenge is motherfucking sweet. “Your. Husband.”

“Husband? You want me to marry you?” Aurora blinks, realization flashing behind her eyes. “Oh, hell no. You’re delusional. I would never

marry you.”

I move my hand to the side, offering myself access to her neck. I run my lips along her exposed skin. She shivers when my teeth graze her.

I tell myself my actions, my touch, are driven by revenge.

That tasting Aurora, grinding my knee against her pussy, and forcing more shameful moans out of her, are acts of cruelty.

“Prison it is, then.” I run my tongue over her jaw one last time. And tear myself off her to watch her crumble.

Her hands are shivering as she flattens them against the wall.

Her neat bun has gone askew. Creases have formed on her pristine suit.

Tears line her pretty eyes.

She’s a mess. I wrecked her.

“Why, Everett?”

Because torture doesn’t come in the form of touch alone. It also comes in the form of taking it away.

“As I said.” I right myself, adjusting my painful hard-on. Willing my beating heart to slow the fuck down. “You have two choices. One, to accept your sentence. A life sentence, if I so choose. The other option—”

“And I asked you why?” Shock makes her sound younger than she is.

“Because.” I walk back to my desk, perching on the edge. “That’s what you deserve.”

“I can’t do life in prison.”

Her half-demand, half-plea goes right over my head. I shrug.

“I won’t make it. You can’t do this to me.”

I cross my legs at the ankles, folding my arms over my chest.

Both my eyebrows raise as I feign boredom. This one isn’t easy to pull off. No red-blooded creature could ever be bored by this panicked, flushed version of Aurora.

I’m no different.

But that’s none of her goddamn business.

“Hence your second option.” I’m talking purposefully slow. To ridicule her. To get more of those pouty lips and unsheathed rage. More of my revenge. “Marrying me.”

“Neither.” She flinches into the wall, pressing her legs tightly together. Poor thing has no idea if she’s offended or turned on. “My parents won’t let you go through with it.”

My enemies.

She’s your enemy too.

“Fuck. Your. Parents.” I enunciate the words slower than before. “They can’t help you.”

I’m past mocking Daddy’s little princess.

I’m threatening her.

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm.” I cock my head. “Let’s see. What do you think *they can’t help you* means?”

“I… Look, you might be powerful, but so are they,” she whispers, as if talking about these fuckers will summon them. If only. “They’ll appeal whatever sentence you give me. Either that, or they’ll ruin you before they let you marry me. They didn’t choose you.”

“There’s no such thing as equal footing, even among the powerful.” My robe is killing me. It’s heavy. Hot. I push off the desk, taking it off. “You should know that.”

“So let me get this straight—you’re more powerful than them?”

Light filters through the window behind me, softening her face and making her eyes shimmer with excitement.

With hunger.

For what?

She isn’t hungry, asshole. Can’t you see she’s manipulating you?

She is. I can’t fall for her mind games.

“I’m getting bored, Aurora. Really fucking bored.” I place my robe neatly on the desk behind me and rest my hands on the edge. “You have ten seconds to choose, or I’m throwing your ass in prison.”

“I…”

The outline of my hard cock grabs her attention for a moment, before she forces her eyes back to my face. Before she rearranges herself.

Her contemptuous expression reminds me of who raised her. The heartless motherfuckers I’m going to destroy.

“I’ll marry you.”

Aurora’s answer shouldn’t stir any warm emotion in me.

And it doesn’t. Absolutely not.

So when I say, “Good girl,” I don’t praise her. I’m saying it to fuck with her head.

I see slight relief wash over her, and I smirk.

Who’s delusional now?

“Let’s go.” I push off the desk and stalk over to her. My hand becomes a manacle around her wrist. Too easily, I haul her toward my closet.

“What—where are you taking me? The door is that way.” She tries to free herself while I tug her further into my chambers. “Are we doing this now? The ceremony? I—no. Everett, stop.”

“My workday isn’t over.” I don’t look at her while I yank my closet door open. Clean robes, ties, and pressed suits hang on the rack. “I have about three more hours until I’m done.”

“Let me go.” Aurora punches my shoulder. “Everett, why won’t you let me go?”

Because I like having my fingers curled around your wrist.

Fuck that. “I can’t have you running off, can I?”

“Please.” The desperation in her tone has precum leaking from the tip of my cock. “Don’t.”

Viciously, I turn her around. Grabbing one of my black spare ties off the rack, I bind Aurora’s wrists at her back.

When her lips part to scream, I press her cheek gently into the wall next to the closet, covering her mouth to quiet her.

“I can’t have you making a sound either. Thank you for the reminder,” I say. “Wouldn’t want my bride to cause a scene.”

She jerks under my touch. “Stop it,” she groans, the words muffled but unmistakable. “Stop it.”

She’s trembling. Angry. Scared.

Good.

The throbbing in my cock turns into a pressure that’s impossible to ignore. I rock my hips into her tied hands.

God, *yes*. The friction helps to clear my mind of the thick lust clouding it.

Problem is, now I can see what’s in front of me.

Aurora. Not crying.

She isn’t crying.

Anyone else would be losing their shit at a time like this, but she isn’t.

Curious.

Absolutely not. Nothing about her is interesting.

I reach into the closet and grab a second tie. Fast, so she won’t get to scream, I nudge it between her lips, getting bit while she attempts to stop me.

I shove it deeper into her mouth. The silk material is there, on her tongue, when I tie it around her head.

She looks beautiful like this.

Silenced. Gagged. Shaking with either rage or fear, I can't tell.

"Now, be good." I drag her toward the closet. Her heels scrape loudly against the wooden floor on the short way there.

"Mmmmm!" Her eyes widen as she screams something I can't decipher. Another protest, maybe. Another demand.

None of it matters.

"You're going to wait for me here." Shoving her inside, I hold her by the throat just long enough to make sure she won't try to escape while I talk to her. "I hope you don't have to use the bathroom anytime soon. See you in three hours."

Her groan is silenced by her gag.

I slam the heavy closet door in her face, cutting off her muffled cries in an instant.

Click, and it's locked.

Robe. Keys.

I'm halfway across the room when my phone vibrates inside my pocket.

Winston.

I send it to voicemail, then text him.

Me: *If you or anyone on your behalf comes anywhere near this court to take what's mine, you'll be charged with abduction and false imprisonment.*

Winston Clarke: *Pick up your damn phone, and I won't.*

Me: *No.*

This is the most information I'm willing to offer him.

When I have this part of my revenge locked down, then he and I can talk.

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4

AURORA

Eventually, after a million excruciating hours, my fiancé removed my gag and restraints. While he did, he threatened me to *"Be a good girl and leave here quietly with me, or you won't like the consequences."*

Without much of a choice, I complied. Together, we left the courthouse.

Everett was the picture of calm, while I shivered on the way to his car. He didn't care that I was squirming from a full bladder. Or that my senses were overloaded by the sudden light and noise after so long in the dark.

He wanted me to get to his car, and nothing more.

So here I am, trapped again.

His driver pulls up at Everett's front door at the end of the long driveway. He lives on the outskirts of Boston, like my parents, but they're not neighbors. Thank God for small favors.

But who cares about them? Not me.

"Everett, I have to go to the bathroom." I shift on the car seat. "Please."

"Patience."

He climbs out of the car, walks over to my side, and unbuckles me as if I were a child.

Then he grabs my wrist.

"No, let me go," I plead.

His narrowed eyes brook no argument, so I don't bother. There are other, more important things to worry about than this particular power play.

"Fine." I let him drag me into his home.

We go past his silent staff. Past the rest of the first floor of his home that's…black. Black wooden floors. Black furniture. Everything is so dark.

Nothing is darker than my future husband.

We keep walking up the stairs to the second floor where sconces line the walls of the silent halls.

"Get in." He beckons me into another dark room, his expression one of irritation.

I run inside, foolishly turning my back on my enemy. What choice do I have? If I don't make it to the bathroom in the next three seconds, I might die.

"I'll be back soon," he announces.

"Whatever."

"Brat," Everett mutters before he slams the door.

I hear the lock slide into place, but for the moment, it doesn't scare me. I don't cry or shiver.

Finally, I can relieve myself.

Once done, I lose my heels. Wash my hands and face. All that dried spit reminds me of the gag, and I shudder.

Now that I don't have to go to the bathroom, reality sinks in.

I'm a prisoner in this room, just like I was back home, and the man who hates me holds the key to my freedom.

My eyes dance all over the place. A nervous gesture.

Like the rest of Everett's house, everything here is black with gold undertones. The padded headboard, the vintage lamps on the bedside tables, the two tufted chairs in the seating area, and the marble fireplace.

It's overwhelming. Expensive. Regal. It's as dark as it is beautiful.

The lawns that I can see from over here, through the huge window, are stunning. The red, purple, green, and gray flowers scattered throughout his gardens run wild.

Yet there's an order to the chaos. A mirror to my captor's soul, it seems.

Fuck. What should I do?

From a nearby room, probably the one I'm sharing a wall with, I hear the water running. He's taking a shower.

The smart thing to do would be to take advantage of this opportunity he's given me. I could find some sort of pin and pick the lock.

But…

Where would I go? Would his staff even let me take a step out of this room? This house?

Knowing my parents' staff, the answer is, sadly, doubtful.

Desperation settles in my bones, heavy and numbing. I decide to fight this battle another day, dropping onto the black four-poster bed.

As challenging as it is, I'm doing everything I can to maintain my sanity. Counting my breaths, clinging to logic, reminding myself that panic only gives him more power.

I'm doing it while the man who's blackmailing me is taking a shower. Taking his time. He doesn't have a care in the world.

As if he didn't lock and gag me in his chambers' closet for hours.

As if he isn't forcing me to marry him.

As if he won't force me to do more.

Fucker.

A caustic laugh bubbles in my throat. God, I'm pathetic, aren't I? Calling him names in my head. Pretending to hate him, his ultimatum, and being here.

I wish it were that easy. I wish I could think of this as just another prison.

If I could only hate Everett the way I hate Winston and Molly. If only he felt like another jailor.

Thing is, he's different.

No one had ever touched me the way he did. No one had ever looked at me like *that*.

Like they wanted to do vile, dirty things to me.

A chill runs up my spine. My fingers flex on the black covers before I sit up straighter.

I kick my feet in the air, but no matter what I do, I can't shake this nervousness.

He'll be out of the shower any minute now.

Once he's out, what will he do to me?

The worst things imaginable.

Oh God.

What happened in his chambers was already too much.

He made me want him, and that can't happen again.

Except…I can't forget it.

I'm too drawn to the memory of him.

How he ground his knee between my thighs.

My hand goes to my neck, tracing the path his lips took. Remembering how warm and depraved they felt on my skin.

I'll break you was the threat his teeth posed.

His hands caressed my body as if he knew me. Like he could tell what would make me wet.

Like he had the right to turn me on by choking me.

I scratch my throat. Wipe my mouth. Removing his memory from my body.

Being choked, gagged, or pinned up against the wall wasn't foreplay.

He hates me.

He'll hurt me.

Marrying him is the least of my concerns. The real nightmare will come after that. I'll have to survive him day after day.

And so far, life has been peachy, right?

No, it hasn't, but he can't know that. I won't ever tell him he can't hurt me worse than they did.

He won't get to use my fucked-up life against me.

The water stops running in the pipes.

A terrifying silence ensues. The fear of the unknown has my anxiety spiking.

Get up, Aurora, a voice whispers. *You have to be ready when he's back here.*

What's the use?

He's stronger. Vicious and more calculated than I'll ever be.

I won't be able to overpower him.

A whooshing sound puts me on high alert.

The door to his room. He's opened it.

The house is warm, keeping the chill of the fall outside.

Still.

Shivers run up and down my spine. My fingers dig into the covers. Eyes snap shut.

Nothing will stop him, I'm aware of that.

The way he looked at me, it was as if he wanted to punish me.

For what?

Shoplifting isn't it. I refuse to accept this excuse. This lie.

Then why?

Doesn’t matter.

He’s coming.

I open my eyes, bracing for impact.

The door opens.

Everett’s dark presence fills the doorway.

My heart thumps erratically, as I wait for his next move. Watching him closely.

A white dress shirt hugs his lean, accentuated muscles. Midnight blue pants sit on a tapered waist. His feet are bare, elegant, and manly.

The delicious scent of his cologne permeates the room, tickling my nostrils.

He hasn’t come here empty-handed. In one hand, he holds a leather tote. He has his phone in the other.

“Aurora.” My name on his lips is a curse. An insult.

I gravitate toward him anyway. My thighs press together as I’m faced with my future husband.

The most beautiful man alive.

And yet, danger radiates off him. I can’t forget that. Even if he’s brought me…what is this? Gifts? I don’t need them. I need him to be nice, or I need him to let me go. That’s all I’ll ever need.

“Stand up,” he orders.

A baser, unfamiliar instinct pushes me off the bed. I scramble to my feet, chin dipped.

My mind rebels against it. This quick obedience, this isn’t like me.

Doing my homework, cleaning my room, “*stop stealing like a petty thief*”—every single one of my parents’ demands was met with resistance.

Until I was thrown into the basement, I wouldn’t heed their demands. I wouldn’t make their life easy, though I knew I’d pay for it.

This man is practically a stranger. A terrible one, at that.

Yet here I am.

Doing as I’m told.

A lamb to the slaughter.

“Your hair is a mess.”

Thrown by his comment, I cut my gaze up to find his raking over my body.

Heat floods me under his inspection, even as his expression is nothing but distaste. “Your clothes are crumpled,” he adds.

At the second insult, the urge to talk back surges within me. A tidal wave that grows from a place of hurt and resentment.

He can't talk to me like that.

He's the one who ruined my hair. If he hadn't locked me up in a closet, my outfit would look as pristine as it was this morning.

Before I say a word, a metaphorical hand clamps over my mouth.

Hush. Don't give him the satisfaction. Don't give him an excuse to ruin you for real.

The voice is right. Wealthy, influential people hardly ever listen. And they have ways of making you pay.

I'll have other days, other opportunities to tell him exactly what I think about him. When both of us are in a less volatile state.

"Okay," is all I say.

Everett takes a step into the room, then a few more. The house is otherwise quiet. Either his staff is done for the day, or they shiver in fear as hard as I do.

He's so close now that I have to look up to see him.

"This…" He nods to himself. "This is perfect."

Perfect?

"Ha." A nervous laugh scrapes up my throat, sharp and raw. "You—" *You look annoyingly perfect yourself. You, not me.* "What's changed that I'm perfect all of a sudden?"

"Your parents have been blowing up my phone." He tosses the device on the bed behind me, showing me exactly what he thinks about them and their phone calls. "They've sent more lawyers from Larry's firm. I had them kicked out of my courtroom. All of them, other than the courier who got you your birth control pills."

Who cares about my pills?

Hope trickles into my lungs, warming my soul from the inside.

Is it possible that twenty-two years of cold winters have finally been blessed with summer?

Is it possible that Everett isn't here to hurt me? That he's figured out my parents aren't overprotective; they're just mean and abusive?

This could be a rescue mission. Marrying him so they wouldn't be able to reach me could be his way of saving me. He might not be nice, but as long as he's here to save me, I can take it.

This hope again, it’s a dangerous thing. A devastating emotion that builds you up only to tear you down when reality strikes. I’ve learned that lesson too many times to let my guard slip now.

Which is why I don’t get ahead of myself. Quietly as possible, I ask, “What’s my parents got to do with the way I look?”

His jaw tics. Forehead creases.

My question pissed him off. It was the wrong one to ask.

What do you ask your savior? I’ve never had one before.

“Everett, I—”

“Humiliating you, for starters. That’s fucking perfect.” His mocking tone answers my question. He cocks his head, adding, “Spoiled little rich girl.”

My foolish hope burns at the stake. Fear lurches up my throat.

This isn’t a rescue mission after all.

When my lips tremble, I turn my head to the window. Hiding this weakness. Hiding from him.

“Second.” He grabs my chin, his fingers biting into my skin as he forces my eyes to his. “Your parents will see you now. I’ll show you how powerless they really are. How you’re never getting out of this.”

My heart splinters, tearing me from the inside.

I get what’s so *perfect* about this situation now. It’s my downfall.

“Is that the worst you’ve got?” I’m acting proud, lifting my chin in defiance. “Taking a picture of me? Fucking do it. I’m not scared of you.”

“A picture?” His steely chuckle sends ice racing up my spine. “No, princess. A picture won’t hurt them—or you. A picture won’t get the point across.”

The sound of his bag hitting the bed makes me yelp. My body jerks, but Everett’s hold cements me into place.

Annoyed, I flatten my hands on his chest, trying to push him away.

I’d have better luck moving a mountain.

Despair is a hard fist locked around my lungs.

“Let me go,” I beg, twisting in his hold, just barely.

His free hand latches on my hip, yanking me to him. To his cock.

He’s harder than he was in his chambers. Bigger.

He isn’t ashamed of his throbbing dick. He weaponizes it against me.

A means to instill fear in me. It’s working. My face goes numb. My stomach bottoms out.

But I’m also painfully aroused.

I press my lips together to bury every ounce of fear. To silence the weak, needy sounds threatening to escape past my lips.

“Listen to me.” His eyes bore into mine. “We’re getting married. Tomorrow.”

“Old news,” I blurt out, forcing myself to be brave and taunt him. “To me and them.”

“Aurora.” Every contact point between us sends jolts of pain and humiliation through me. “Underestimating me won’t end well for you.”

His touch is possessive, a silent warning that he’s in control. As his fingers dig deeper into my flesh, his cock almost tears through both our clothes.

“What do you want, then?”

“This isn’t about what I *want*. This is about what’s going to happen.” His voice is strained, his control of me unrelenting. “Little by little, I’ll strip the three of you of your sense of security. From your comfortable lives.”

“You’re really going to hurt them?” Awe mixes with terror as I look at him. Finally, someone’s standing up to that couple. I don’t know why he hates them, and I don’t care. What unsettles me is knowing he probably hates me because of them. “What are you going to do?”

“You don’t deserve an answer.” Everett thrusts me into him. “I’m giving it to you anyway. Partially.”

“Well?” I hate him. I fear him. I have to hold my ground. “Talk.”

“It’ll hurt, princess.” His mouth hovers a hairbreadth from mine, electricity humming in the air around us. “I’m going to make you suffer, all of you, and by the time I’m done, you’ll be begging for death.”

I won’t. I’ll fight him every step of the way, starting now.

He already plans to do the unthinkable. At least I’ll go down with my dignity intact. Just another reason why I’ll never tell him I find him even remotely attractive. Never.

“Lucky fucking me,” I growl.

“Yes. Lucky fucking you.” Everett’s nostrils flare.

I don’t manage to say another single word.

In swift, harsh movements, he tears my jacket off me. Throws it on the floor.

We’re both on his bed now, me sitting on his lap, thrashing, needing to break free from his grip.

My fight gets me nowhere. Worse than nowhere. It makes Everett's cock harden against me.

That's when I stop wriggling.

That's the moment I realize that I'm really, truly fucked.

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5

EVERETT

As we wait for her parents to pick up the phone, Aurora tenses in my lap. Her eyes are wide as she stares at me.

She hasn't just stopped fighting me. She's seeking comfort.

From me.

I don't get to wonder why when Winston picks up, his ugly face appearing on my screen. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Everett?"

His eyes are squinted, his face beet red, his jaw twitching. He's unraveling, practically growling at me.

I drink in the sight.

"Winston." The moment his name leaves my lips, his wife shoves her face into the frame, green eyes blazing. She opens her mouth to interrupt, but I'm not having it. "Molly."

"She doesn't belong to you," she spits out.

Strange choice of words.

As strange as the fact that she looks incredibly put together. Not a blonde hair slips out of her low ponytail. Her mascara is immaculate.

Anyone who cares about their children would've cried by now. She or her husband should have red-rimmed eyes. Worry lines would've wrinkled the corners of their eyes.

Their hair would've stood out in every direction.

The Clarkes are simply inconvenienced. Upset that I took their… *belonging*.

“That’s where you’re wrong.” A reflex has me tightening my grip on Aurora. My arm flexes around her. A demonstration of power. That’s all there is to this touch. “She does belong to me. Our marriage will be officiated tomorrow. Aren’t you going to congratulate us?”

“You’re not marrying her,” Aurora’s dad growls.

“Shut up, Winston.”

Another strange thing happens. At my clipped voice, Aurora’s tense body relaxes.

She’s leaning into me.

The weight of her gaze is there, heavy and burdensome. Begging me to…what?

She’s still fucking with me. Still playing me. This has to be it.

So why does it feel real?

She should be running to them for help. They’re her parents.

Then again…

The first time I saw Aurora as a woman, not a girl, was at one of the Royalty meetings. She was nineteen then.

Her expression was closed off. Condescending.

It didn’t make her any less mesmerizing. That blue gown clung to her body like it was made just for her. My fingers itched to curl around her neck.

Under different circumstances, I might’ve even liked her.

I was definitely obsessed with her.

Begrudgingly, my enemy has been the only woman on my mind ever since. I haven’t touched another woman in all that time.

But that’s beside the point.

The point is, she didn’t talk to anyone. I finally notice now that she never did.

Not even her parents.

Fuck. What am I missing here?

Nothing. Goddamn nothing.

She’s using her body to manipulate me, and for a second there, I let my cock take over my sense of mission.

Never again.

The emotional wall I’ve erected between us reminds me of why I’m doing this in the first place. For who.

My family.

Mine is dead, and I’m here to ruin theirs.

Winston takes a moment to recover, his gaze darting between me and his deceitful daughter. “Don’t you dare tell me to shut up.”

“Giving me orders, Winston?” Fuck my attraction to her. Fuck that pang in my chest. This is about revenge. “That’s rich.”

I slide my hand up her stomach, brushing my fingertips over her blouse and feeling the light weight of breast in my palm.

Winston’s face grows even redder, if that’s possible. Her mother gasps.

Aurora buries her face in my chest. But the poor, humiliated thing is too slow to hide her mouth against my shirt, and now all three of us hear her moan.

The sound and my obscene touch elicit a growl from her dad.

Unfortunately, he isn’t enraged enough, so I keep going up, up, up.

My hand clasps around Aurora’s throat. I don’t choke her. Don’t demand a life for a life. There’ll be time for that.

After I’m done playing with her. After I stop feeling so fucking poisoned by years of hate.

“You better not damage her,” he warns.

“Damage how?” I tighten my hold like I’m about to kill her. No one has to know that I won’t.

She yelps, her head snapping up to look at me.

Despite the pain and humiliation, she searches for me.

Maybe it’s shame that stops her from turning to her parents.

Fuck if I care.

I really don’t.

This little brat is just as rotten, just as condescending as they are. She shouldn’t have lived her comfortable rich-girl life. Her adoptive dad should’ve spent years in prison.

Yet here she is. Here they all are.

Alive and, finally, under my thumb.

“She belongs to us.” The vein on his throat bulges as he repeats his nonsense. “Bring her back here.”

When did kids become anyone’s property?

Well, not my problem.

She isn’t theirs anymore. She’s my fiancée. Mine to ruin.

Mine.

“Do you, princess? Belong to them?” I stare down at her, my voice low and biting. She doesn’t answer right away. I twist her face toward her parents, forcing her to look. “Look at them. Then tell me.”

Still no answer. My grip tightens slightly.

“Answer me.” When she’s quiet for a beat too long, I shake her by her throat. “Answer me.”

“N-no.” She casts her eyes down. Her pulse is deliciously quick. “No.”

“Aurora,” her mother warns.

Aurora’s shame is as exquisite as her parents’ indignance. I tilt her face up, my lips brushing her ear. “Who do you belong to, then?”

When I pull back, I see her blinking furiously. Tears line her eyes. Her teeth gnash.

“You.”

“Louder.”

Aurora surprises the hell out of me by clearing her throat and straightening her back as much as I allow.

She’s slipping back into the sharp, calculating version of herself I saw in court. In the Royalty meetings.

This unbroken version of her undermines everything I’ve worked for.

And goddammit, it’s hot as hell.

“You.” The word is a growl.

She says it more to them than to me. Like she’s relieved to be out of their reach.

This poisonous family’s business is none of my concern.

Molly scoffs, walking away from us. Winston doesn’t pay attention to his wife. “You’re going to pay for this.”

You’re going to pay for this.

Again, Aurora’s parents use the wrong phrasing.

No *Why are you doing this?* or *If you want to hurt us, take one of us instead.*

“See, I don’t think so.” I move my hand up Aurora’s jaw to the back of her head, until I’m tugging on her bun. Her hair is soft. Her hot body is a distraction I try hard to set aside. “What I’m going to do is marry this pretty little thing tomorrow at our bi-monthly meeting. A few hours later, I’m going to fuck her vir—wait. Princess, are you a virgin?”

I haven’t considered it before, but now I need to know if another man has taken her cunt.

I’m not being territorial. I’m really not.

This is just another layer of my revenge plan.

Her dad says nothing.

I wouldn’t have been able to hear him anyway, because his daughter has stolen my entire attention. With her lips that part and close several times. With how she squirms in my lap, hardening my cock.

I want that to be all mine. All of her.

“Aurora.” Winston scoffs. “Keep your mouth shut. Don’t embarrass us.”

“I am,” she says, sounding as invested in hurting her father as I am. “I’m a virgin.”

“Good girl.” I shouldn’t be rubbing her nape. Her eyes shouldn’t flutter at the rough touch. But since our contact turns her father into a human tomato, I allow it. “As I was saying. I’m going to fuck her virgin cunt. That’s what’s going to happen.”

“We’ll see about that.”

His threats might work on young girls. On his employees.

I’m neither of those.

“Before you hang up, future father-in-law.”

Aurora gasps when I tug on her silky hair.

“Here’s a preview for tomorrow.”

Time stills as I twist my fiancée’s face to mine. I’m vicious, goddamn ruthless about tugging on her roots. On inhaling her sweet scent.

Please, stop, she mouths, wanting the words to reach me and only me.

I’m not in the mood to entertain her, even less so with my cock throbbing. With my temples pounding from wanting to ruin both her and him so bad.

“No.”

One breath. Then I crush my lips to hers while holding the phone up for her dad to see. Giving him a taste of my nightmares.

Taking what’s mine.

She screams into my mouth. Screams louder when my teeth pierce her bottom lip. I lean into the kiss, licking her delicious blood off her.

Fuck, she tastes good. Even her fists that pound against my chest feel like something else.

Like more.

I want that elusive *more*. More kissing, more biting, more taking from her.

I do it until the air in the room shifts.

Until Aurora gives in. She moans into my mouth. Opens her lips wider.

She's hesitant and so sweet that I can't help but rub my tongue against hers. Gently.

The background noise from the other line is silenced. Winston must've ended the call.

Now will be a good time to stop kissing her. I've gotten what I wanted. Winston, pissed. Aurora, hurt.

Wish I could. Lost in this moment, I drop my phone on the bed. Aurora's cheeks are soft in my palms, the grip on her allowing me to change the angle of her face. To steal more of her.

The spoiled princess digs her fingers into my shirt as her tongue keeps testing, trying.

As if she's never been kissed before.

I bite her, and she groans. She's still surrendering to me. Still searching for me.

Fuck, I'm enjoying this.

This can't be happening.

One more taste, and I flip her over onto her back. Aurora is pinned beneath me, whimpering, panting.

I really have to stop. I should leave her wanting.

Dammit. I—God, one more. Another one.

The more we kiss, the more I realize just how beautifully inexperienced she is.

I want out of this room.

I want to crawl under her skin.

Both of us are at war with one another. Lips clashing. Tongues fighting.

Her skirt is in the goddamn way. I shove it up her waist, push her knees apart, and settle between her legs.

Aurora is following my lead, and it turns me right the fuck on.

She loves the angry way I kiss her. The harsh bite of my fingers. When I sink my teeth into her bottom lip, her breath hitches before she moans *Yes*.

I feel the word vibrating on her throat when she says it. A hand on her inner thigh has her back arching off the bed.

Giving her pleasure has never been part of the plan.

I grit my teeth and remind myself that this is a form of control. This is power. Not some fucked-up connection.

“Enough.” I rip myself off her seductive mouth, breathing hard.

Aurora’s supple lips glisten, tempting me. And her eyes, they’re so sad. How fucking heartless of her. Trying to convince me that she’s someone worth saving. An innocent who could give me what I need.

Liar. Like father, like *adopted* child.

“Why?” She reaches up to cup my cheek.

I bat it away.

“Do I look like I’m in a sharing mood?” My eyebrows crash together, and she sees me for who I am, shrinking into the bed with fear.

“You obviously hate me.” Her voice is small. Scared. Perfect. “So… Why are we getting married again?”

She doesn’t get it, even after the phone call.

She has no idea how badly her father wronged me and my family.

Or maybe she does.

For all I know, her innocent act could be a ruse.

“Because I fucking said so.”

When she tries to move to the side, to get away from my cock that’s pressed against her pussy, I pin her down harder to the bed with my hand on her thigh.

“You’ll walk down the aisle in front of everyone we know because I. Said. So.” I bite down on my bottom lip. “As my bride, you’ll wear virginal white, but it’ll only be for show. That same night, Aurora, I’m going to make you my whore.”

She slaps me across the face.

“Keep hitting me. Test me.” I sit up, glowering at her. “See how far that gets you.”

“You’re the one testing me.” Her eyes shoot daggers at me.

“I own you.” With my free hand, I pluck out the engagement gift I brought to her out of the tote and force it onto her wedding finger.

Aurora’s eyes widen at the ring. A cushion-cut diamond, over a million dollars’ worth, fit for someone I should love.

I don’t love Aurora. I’m mocking her with this ridiculously giant ring that glints under the light, sharp and blinding.

“I get to do whatever I want with you.”

Since Aurora snarls at the ring, I assume I’ve made my point and get on with it.

“You, on the other hand—”

“Go to hell.” Her choked voice is music to my ears.

It would be deliciously hoarse once I fuck her throat.

I lift her second present to her face. The sleek, black velvet box reveals nothing.

My future wife freaks out anyway. Nails clawing at my forearm over my shirt. Screams screeching in my ears.

“Stop it.” I have a hand around her throat, cutting off her air supply almost completely. “The staff was ordered to ignore your screams. Nevertheless, I’m not having it. I won’t have a brat for a wife. You will learn to behave.”

That quiets her. That also has tears running down her cheeks.

At last.

“Tell me,” she breathes out while I open the box. “Please, just tell me why you’re doing this.”

The small remote and the key to the collar are already in my pocket. I had a member of my staff buy it and charge the remote earlier today.

“As I mentioned, it’s because I want to.” I wrap the collar around her neck, then lock it. “Because you’re mine.”

Her cries of *no* and *please* turn me into a bloodthirsty vampire.

“Because you deserve it.”

“I don’t”—Aurora manages to slip from under me, then she’s scrambling off the bed. Hands raised between us, she backs up toward the door—“deserve anything.”

“Come back here.” I stay very still. “This is your last chance, brat.”

My thumb runs over the remote’s button. She’s too focused on my face to see me holding it.

“I’m going to leave now.” The sound of her fear is hot.

“No, you aren’t.”

I get up.

She walks backwards faster. “Watch me.”

“I’m watching you all right.” The remote is set on the lowest intensity. I’m closing in on her just in case she faints and drops to the floor. I want her hurt, not dead. Not damaged. “Come. Here.”

“You’re going to choke me?” She’s right there, at the doorway. A small figure beneath the high ceilings of my home. “Going to walk me like a dog down the aisle? No. *No*.”

The image she's planted in my head stokes a flame within me. Every muscle in my body flexes with need.

Her, crawling to me.

Jesus.

"The wedding needs to look legit."

For all our society's crimes, treating her like a dog wouldn't be forgiven. God knows I'll need these assholes on my side to land the final blow on the Clarkes.

"We will, however, play." My eyebrows knit together. "Starting tomorrow, you'll be my wife. My toy. Whatever the hell I want you to be."

"No."

"Wow. Another no. Careful, or I'd think you're getting paid to use this word."

"Asshole."

Click.

As soon as I press the button on the remote, electricity jolts her.

Her hand flies to her collar. The other one clutches the doorframe for dear life. "What—what the fuck?"

"She didn't get to ask questions. Neither do you." Anger pushes the confession out of me.

I've been meaning to keep it a secret. This vulnerability.

Unfortunately, this day has taken its toll on me.

"She?" Aurora's brow furrows. "Who?"

My features twist into a frown. She has no idea who I'm talking about?

She should have. Though I've kept my family's burial services private and out of the press, she should've heard about it. Eleven years have passed since. Eleven years that she's been coming to the Royalty's meetings, eleven years that her parents could've and should've mentioned it to her.

Not my problem.

"Hmm." Tilting my head, I'm back into my body, clicking the button again.

"Everett, no!" Her nails dig into the doorframe. She's desperate to stay standing.

"No, no, no." I'm one foot away, clicking the button one, two, three times.

I'm not sure whether her peaked nipples or her *"Fuck, stop doing it to me"* get me harder.

I guess both. “This word has no power in this house. And neither do you.”

One click too many. Her eyes roll to the back of her head. Lids flutter shut.

Knees buckling.

My fiancée is beautiful, limp, and passed out.

In my arms.

Viciously mine.

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6

EVERETT

My bedroom is drowned in shadow. The curtains have been drawn tight, the lamp on the nightstand bleeding a muted glow across the dark furniture and floors.

Every corner here is mine. Every inch of this room will carry memories of Aurora's misery long after she's gone, which is why I carried her here after her body gave up on her.

Twenty minutes have passed since. Twenty minutes with her motionless, with me stretched out beside her, watching her.

She's beautiful in her stillness. Her head rests to the side, hair spilling like a veil across her face. One of her hands is curled into a fist, as if her body's subconscious is trying to protect her from me.

It won't do her any good. She's defenseless here, in her current state. She hasn't woken up, not even when I breathed her name against her skin or shook her harder than necessary.

Better this way, when she's like this. Helpless, mine.

I'm going to keep her here as my prisoner. My sex doll to torment and use.

When *I* feel like my revenge has reached its satisfying conclusion, that's when I'll kill her and the rest of them.

It'll be a while before it happens.

For now, she's here. Mine to ruin.

I brush a lock of her hair off her face, telling myself it's part of my vengeance. That I don't want to see *her*, but her flushed cheeks in case she

wakes up with me here. With her monster, propped on an elbow, watching her.

“You and I are going to have so much fun together.” I hear the hate in my voice. The lust.

As the silence lingers, memories from earlier rise to the surface. I still feel her clinging to me.

Me.

I…

Fuck. Even in her sleep, she’s trying to manipulate me.

She’s going to pay for it.

I start by testing, again, just how out of it she is, sliding my fingers down her spine.

The light slap to her ass gets no reaction…from her.

My body, though, is a live wire.

Cock hard. Teeth clenched.

“Whatever you’re trying to do to me, it won’t work.” My blood thrums in my veins. “You’ll see that for yourself. Then you’ll learn firsthand how cruel and unfair life is.”

Before I can think better of it, I flatten my hand on her back. A possessive gesture.

Her soft breath and silence continue to be such a fucking turn-on. Precum wets my boxers as I take in the sight of her.

She’s peaceful. Vulnerable.

Ready to be defiled.

Aurora and my revenge both captivate me. I push myself to sit on the edge of the bed next to her legs.

My fingers flex over her back. My cock jerks with sick satisfaction since she won’t wake up.

This stubborn, perfect fucking disaster is going to make my life a living hell. And I, in return, will derive immense pleasure from taming her.

She’ll take it. She’ll cry and bargain.

But that’s the thing about being owned. You don’t get a say in anything.

With my fingers sliding down her body, Aurora doesn’t so much as tremble. I hook them on the hem of her skirt, taking my time as I push it up her thighs. I’m indulgent, and yes, dammit, she feels nice.

She’s also a dirty, filthy girl.

A smirk tugs at my lips as I look at the dark spot on her white underwear. The reminder of how I broke her in my office. With my knee between her legs, she moaned for me despite herself.

Pressing my finger to the fabric, I realize it's a *dried* dark spot.

"Tsk, tsk." I don't have to be cruel. She doesn't hear me. And yet I do. "If you want to survive me, Miss Clarke, you can't afford to be dry. Ever."

I never thought the day would come that I'd talk to a woman that way. Treat her that way.

There's no excuse for it.

No explanation, other than I've changed. My heart is buried beneath layers of dirt in the ground. What's left of me is vengeance and lust.

Aurora is getting both.

My phone flashes with a message. Another one.

Whoever's looking for me will have to wait.

Touching her is what I want. It's what I'm taking.

I inch closer, spreading her legs for me.

Then I slide her panties to the side and push her ass a little higher.

Desire slices through me, sharp and cutting as a cleaver.

Aurora is more than a temptation. She's every need I didn't know I had personified.

Her cunt is so fucking distracting, and hell no… I don't want her, the person.

Her body, that's what I want. That's what I'm going to ruin.

I start by pushing my thumb between her lips, sliding it in and out of her cunt.

Just when her wetness coats my entire finger, my damn phone stops me.

This time, I glance at the screen and know I have to get it.

It's Stafford.

The one person other than my family who actually gave a fuck about any of us.

He'd been there for my parents. For me.

When everyone else, except our paid investigators, got tired of searching for Lotus, he came with me. He and I, we'd drive around, looking for her on street corners and in small towns in our area. Call hospitals to ask about her—*yes, her again*.

His kind green eyes were tear-filled when I told him my parents had passed away. He delivered the eulogy before we buried them when I

couldn’t.

I can’t ignore him.

I reach over Aurora, grab my phone, and return to where I was seated.

Stafford: *My parents called me about the shotgun wedding we planned.*

Stafford: *Mom mentioned that the Clarkes never really liked you. They were clueless.*

Stafford: *Meaning they weren’t lying back then. They had no idea about any of it.*

Stafford: *They couldn’t have helped us. I’m not defending them or anything. They’re still assholes. Just thought you should know.*

His parents and what they could or couldn’t do for us is meaningless. I’m past that.

Aurora is my present. A knocked-out Clarke, here in my bed.

While I spread Aurora’s legs wider, settling between them, I type out a message.

Me: *Thanks. See you tomorrow.*

Send.

Phone out of the way, I’m able to fully focus on what I crave the most—taking my anger out on her.

The beating pulse in my cock is relentless as I watch her smooth skin, the wetness trickling down Aurora’s thigh from when I had my thumb inside.

My eyes roam over her body. My breath is hot, each inhale setting fire to my lungs.

Aurora is at a disadvantage.

And I’m equally screwed.

I shouldn’t be *this* attracted to her. My nerves shouldn’t feel raw and exposed like this.

Without thought, my hands run up the backs of her knees, her thighs. The crease that leads to her ass. I squeeze her with all the hate I have within me.

Because she’s alive. Because I want her.

Punishable offenses for which I twist her panties and tug. The bunched-up fabric presses to her cunt, to her asshole.

My pulse goes as wild as my desire.

Finally, I’m wrecking this beautiful, filthy princess.

This is only the beginning. I pull harder as I imagine filling both her holes with my cum. Making her want it despite herself.

That's a far better revenge than just making her take it.

She'll end up hating me and herself.

However, I'll always be there to remind her to hate me a little more.

I'll be there to tell her in person that I swapped her birth control pills.

Earlier, I told her they were delivered to me by her mother. What I didn't mention was that I had my driver go get me identical-looking mints so I could make the switch myself, right there at my bench in court.

Her parents probably think that keeping her baby-free will make her more…marketable. That once they annul the marriage, they can pay someone to suture her back together and sell the lie of her being a virgin.

They're wrong. I'll knock her up in no time. Will ruin her and everything they have planned.

Her suffering won't end there. She'll have a baby with me, but she won't get to hold it. I'll rip the newborn from her arms as soon as she pushes them out of her womb. Build a wall in my home to separate this child from their evil mother.

I'll love and nurture them.

Aurora will die without knowing what they look like.

That's the level of torture I've had in mind for all three of them.

Pure. Deep. One to leave scars on their souls.

I have, until now. My heart revolts against the idea, against hurting her so badly.

The man I've become isn't a man at all.

Silencing what's left of my conscience, I let my instincts take over, and they demand that I defile her.

I rub Aurora's panties up and down her pussy. Her folds are getting red, swelling with need and from the friction.

No one's touched her there before.

Her husband will. She'll take my cock, my mouth, my spit on her.

I hate how much I need that.

Pushing her skirt higher up her thighs, I bunch it at her waist.

There's more to do. More torture to be had.

More pleasure.

I twist the hand that's holding on to her panties, skimming my knuckles over her ass.

She’s blissfully passed out when I lift her hips with my free hand. A couple of inches, giving me access to her cunt.

“Good girl.” My knuckles slide lower, along her wet pussy lips.

It’s nothing compared to what I’ll do to her on our wedding night.

The ink marking my arms and chest burns. The need to claim her has my vision blurring around the edges.

Her pussy won’t be the only hole that I’ll take.

Her ass, that’s mine too. I’ll stretch it. Fuck it. She’ll be walking with a new butt plug shoved inside her every day. Will only get to rest during the night.

She’ll become so. Fucking. Dirty. She’ll have no other choice. With the plug there, she’ll always have *me* on her mind.

My heart pumps blood down through my body.

Eye.

For.

An.

Eye.

My belt is unbuckled. Cock in my fist.

God. *Fuck*. It’s only now that I have my hand wrapped around it that I understand the depth of my dark desires.

Touching myself hasn’t felt this good in years.

But it isn’t about her.

I’ve been lurking in the shadows for too long. The anticipation leading up to this moment of striking them down. That’s what this is about.

My need is as primal as they come.

That’s what I keep telling myself as I shove her panties out of the way. Her cunt, her ass, *her*, they mean nothing to me.

She’s a body to be used and tortured.

A soft, gorgeous, pliant body that’s entirely mine.

Still rubbing my aching cock, I tear her panties off her. Then I lift her hips again, spitting on her tightest hole. Licking myself off her rim.

I’m claiming her. I’m ruining her.

And I need to come. Selfishly, without giving my enemy an ounce of pleasure.

I sit back up, jerking myself off.

This is true justice. This is—*fuck, so good*—fairness. Looking at her, knocked out. At my mercy.

It feeds my revenge.

Feeds my obsession just as much.

“My filthy little slut,” I say, feeling the words forming on my lips.

“Such.” I hold the base of my dick, slapping her ass with the tip. It’s nowhere near as satisfying as cracking my hand on her flesh. It’ll have to do if I don’t want to risk waking her up. “A.” *Slap*, and my balls pull tight. “Slut.”

Degrading her, debasing this gorgeous, fucked-up princess, is hot.

That, too, is justice.

Except justice is the last thing on my mind when I thrust my hips harder into my hand. When I grind my cock along the smooth skin of Aurora’s ass.

She’s on my mind.

My cum on her body. Her rumpled clothes. The torn panties of my future wife.

“Fuck”—I shoot my seed on that forbidden hole, emptying myself on her—“that. Fuck that and fuck you.”

My mind disagrees with me.

Instead of hate, memories of Aurora’s sad blue gaze rise.

The way I held her by the throat. Her uncontrollable moans. The shame laced in every sound.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the slivers of emotion to go away.

While I tuck myself in, they slowly disappear. Dust in the wind.

Am I done with Aurora, though? No.

“Spoiled little princess.” Gathering my cum that’s on her ass, I push one finger inside her. Up to the first knuckle.

It’s a tight fit.

Well, well. She hasn’t been touched or fucked in her ass as well as her pussy. I’m sure she’d be in pain if she were awake for this.

But…she isn’t. Aurora doesn’t even stir.

I don’t smirk. Don’t laugh or draw pleasure from humiliating her. This goddamn guilt creeps up as if it’s never left.

Adding another finger helps numb my overly loud conscience. I concentrate on pumping my thick fingers in and out of her, guaranteeing she’ll be sore later.

She’ll wake with a sting and she’ll know who did it to her.

Me? I won’t show or feel remorse. Not an ounce of it.

Ever.

“Something’s missing, don’t you think, princess?”

As if I haven’t been cruel enough.

You have. The angel on my shoulder sounds oddly familiar.

You haven’t. That other voice, that’s me. Louder. Meaner.

More resolute.

The butt plug in my bedside drawer is new. The rest are in a safe in my closet, ready for my future bride.

After I grab it, I settle back between her thighs. The plug gleams under the soft light.

Aurora’s ass is still slick, still so small. Even relaxed, the plug takes a few twists and turns, and my spit until it slips inside her.

She stretches beautifully around the plug.

For a moment, I’m consumed by the sight of her.

I’m the only man to have seen her like this. The only man who ever will.

Possessiveness slams into me, heavy and unwelcome. It has no place here.

Pain, torture, and revenge do.

I’ll do well to remember that.

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7

AURORA

Bright light shines through my closed eyelids. A hand rests gently on my arm, softly stirring me.

"Miss Clarke." The woman's voice is unfamiliar. "Miss Clarke, it's time to wake up."

Did Mom hire a new staff member? That'd be a first. Kind of. The only way change happens in this house is if someone dies.

I hope one of them did. They never help me. Just stand there and turn their heads whenever Dad drags me to the basement or locks me in my room.

Maybe this new person would finally be decent.

Maybe meeting them would be nice. But to do that, I have to open my eyes. And…my eyelids won't cooperate. They feel stuck, heavy.

Everything feels heavy.

Sinking. Like quicksand. I'm practically part of the bed at this point. My brain is mush.

What happened last night? I must've passed out from screaming in the basement.

Waking up and getting out of here, I have to do that.

All I need is a little more time in this haze. I'm so tired.

"Miss Clarke, please." That voice again. It's a woman, I realize. An undercurrent of urgency is audible beneath her kind tone. "Your wedding is in four hours. You must get up."

My wedding.

Oh, shit.

Reality is a slap in the face.

Yesterday's memories are a splash of cold water, chilling me to the bone.

The trial.

Everett, the cruel and beautiful wrecking ball.

The electric collar.

This soreness in my ass wasn't there before. It's there now. Something's stretching me from the inside.

"No," I murmur, as if this is all a nightmare. It isn't. This is my new reality.

"Please." The hand on my arm squeezes me.

He knocked me out, then touched me while I was unconscious. I'm pretty sure he shoved a plug inside my ass.

I've never seen one in person, but Mom talked about it once. I overheard her on the phone, being judgmental as usual, telling a friend about some woman from their country club who got caught fucking her pool boy and that, according to the rumors, she was wearing a butt plug while he *did* her.

So yeah, that must be it. What Everett put inside me while I was passed out.

And now his staff member is going to help me get ready to marry this bastard.

Before today, I wanted him. He made my heart flutter.

Then he zapped me. Then *this* happened.

A full-body shiver tears through me. I allow myself this single moment of weakness before I snap into action.

"Get away from me." I jump to a sitting position, my eyes flying open to see what and who I'm up against.

Two women in black uniforms stare at me from about a foot away from the edge of the bed. Their gazes are impassive. Both have their long hair braided behind their backs, one blonde and one brunette.

"I'm not going anywhere." I scoot back in a thankfully empty bed.

His bed. I know it's his. The sheets are soaked with Everett's cologne. Overpowering. Masculine. Evil.

"Miss Clarke," the brunette implores. The corners of her eyes crinkle. "We have to get you ready for your wedding. Please."

“I’m not—I’m not marrying him. I won’t.” Panic locks my throat. My neck has a collar secured around it. And my hand, it’s heavy from the weight of his ring. I never asked for any of it. I wanted him, yes, but it’s not fair. I had no idea who he was. No idea at all. “Get me the hell out of here.”

“We aren’t here to harm you,” the blonde implores, raising a tiny golden key for me to see.

My fingers twitch to snatch it from her. To stick it in her eye.

Common sense holds me back. This situation isn’t her fault. I bet the monster pays both women well to heed his unhinged orders. He must be offering them great benefits and—

What the hell?

Why do I care about their benefits?

“If you’d come with us.” A small smile rises on the brunette’s lips.

The light filtering in through the large windows makes both of them look like angels.

But I know better.

They’re Lucifer’s demons.

I’m so done. With the pain. With being humiliated.

More than anything, I’m done with this butt plug.

“Turn around.” No fucking way are they going to stand there and stare at me while I reach for it. Oh, fuck. I don’t have my panties on, I realize. “Now. Or I’ll…”

Or I’ll what?

I’m helpless. Naked under this black gown that someone helped me change into while I was knocked out.

Wait. The lamp on the bedside table, I can weaponize it.

“I won’t hesitate to hit you.” In less than a second, I curl my fingers around the body of the lamp.

“Miss Clarke, I brought the key so we could remove your…necklace.”

Necklace. Yeah, and I’m Cinderella, being polished up for the ball I never agreed to attend.

“After the last twenty-four hours, I’m sure you’d like to shower.” The blonde reaches out to me, ignoring my growls. “My name is Rylee. This is Elena. We’re here to help.”

Help, my ass. They’re here to follow orders.

Getting them to leave me alone is my top priority at the moment.

I pull on the lamp, trying to pick it up.

Trying. Trying. Trying.

And failing.

The controlling bastard had it bolted to the bedside table.

“Argh!” A scream of frustration and despair lurches out of me.

I scramble to the other side of the bed, far from them.

Their shoulders hike up. Their faces twist. Other than that, they won’t back away.

“Miss.” A low hum of electricity buzzes at my neck while Elena pleads, “It’ll be easier for everyone involved if you don’t resist.”

Everett is here. Somewhere. He’s using the damn remote to threaten me.

I look all around the room, telling him, wherever he is, “No.”

A second buzz. This one causes my jaw to lock. My nipples are pulled tight.

I can’t be hot for him. For this. Can’t let him fuck with my head.

My hand flies up to the leather collar. I need it off. I need these tiny shocks to my throat to stop making me wet.

That motherfucker.

“I want to be left alone.” Under the weight of Everett’s invisible threat, my voice drops. “For five fucking minutes. Is that too much to ask?”

A harsher shock pulls a shriek out of me.

“Miss Clarke—”

“Stop!” I scream to the ceiling. To the man who literally holds my life in his hands. “Please, no more.”

This next zap is the harshest.

It knocks most of the thoughts out of my skull. My legs seize. My back arches. And shamefully, I welcome the burn.

Because my last thought before I pass out is, *this is still better than the basement*.

“THERE YOU GO.” A warm, wet washcloth. That’s what I feel trailing from one shoulder to the other.

My exposed shoulders.

At that realization, I jolt awake. A scream tears out of me. My hands fly up to shield myself.

And that’s when I notice I’m not in his bed.

Warm water laps against me. Bubbles cling to my skin. Lavender lingers in the air.

While I was out of it, someone moved me. Placed me in a bath.

The surface of the vast stone tub is slick and hot. The stone warms my skin, grounding me in the nightmare I’ve woken up to.

I’m naked. Exposed. Vulnerable.

Panic causes my gaze to dart all over. This bathroom is even larger than the one I was in when I first arrived. The tiles are black. The vanity has gold and black ornaments engraved on it.

Two sets of hands close in on me. Grabbing. Pinning. Holding me down.

“Miss Clarke.” Rylee. I recognize her voice, though I wish I couldn’t.

“I’m Aurora,” I spit out. The repetition of my adoptive parents’ last name will be the last straw. It’ll tear apart what’s left of my mind. “Aurora.”

I turn my head from side to side, looking at both women. Their brown eyes are wide and kind. I see now that they’re sitting on the ledge of the tub.

They have a full view of my body where the bubbles don’t reach.

Disgust curls in my gut. I’ve been stripped bare of clothing, *and* my power. “Go. Away.”

“Miss—Aurora. Please, don’t worry. We won’t harm you.” Rylee clutches a wet washcloth in her hand.

It drips into the tub.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The sound digs into my ears. Makes me twitch.

But there’s a silver lining.

The collar is gone. So is the pressure from the butt plug in my ass.

Except…this isn’t really okay, is it? I wasn’t conscious when they removed the plug out of me either.

My lungs deflate. Flatten. “You touched me.”

Elena has the decency to cast her eyes to the floor. Her cheeks burn red. “Mr. Alder’s orders.”

Hate barrels through me. Shame is quick to follow.

It has nothing to do with them and everything to do with me.

I’m embarrassed to admit, even to myself, *again*, that despite everything…this place is a step up from home.

Of course Everett’s place is awful.

I’m in a constant state of panic.

My heart never stops pounding.

My muscles are weak after being knocked out twice.

Yet I’m here. Nowhere near Winston and Molly. Miles away from the basement.

Tears spring to my eyes.

There has to be something wrong with me.

There always has been. Ever since I was dumped outside my vile parents’ doorstep as a baby without so much as a note, I’ve been doomed.

She couldn’t know though. My biological mom must’ve thought she’d be doing me a favor. That being raised with money would equal a better life.

I have to believe she meant well.

I have to believe someone in my life wanted what was best for me, or I’ll cry until I pass out.

But this, this can’t be the life Mom had in mind for me. To be raised by monsters. To be married to a bigger one.

She didn’t get to ask questions.

Everett’s words flash through my mind, as sharp as the electric shocks he sent through me.

Suddenly, that’s all that matters.

If she is or was someone special to him, or…

My parents never attended Everett’s wedding, meaning this is his first and only one. He’s single, meaning she got away, or her body is rotting in the ground.

Either way, I have to know. The information will help me manipulate him.

“May I?” Rylee brings the washcloth to my shoulder.

“No,” I snap. “Who’s *she*?”

Both women turn quiet.

Makes sense. *She* could be anyone.

“Everett mentioned a *she*.”

Elena’s lips press into a fine line. Neither woman speaks.

“Was there another woman he was about to marry?” I keep going, not letting their silence deter me. “Did he kill her?”

I wait for them to talk to me. I even let them wash me, hoping they'd reward me for my good behavior with a whispered secret.

While Elena holds me down, Rylee runs the washcloth over my arms. My breasts. My stomach. The movements are surgical.

They stick to the chores assigned to them.

I'm nothing but an item to check off their list.

It drives me crazy. My hackles rise.

Taking a swing at them and running out of this bathroom is impossible, since their boss is probably close by. What's left for me to do is demand answers.

"Who. Is. She?" Satisfaction warms me from the inside as soon as my nails sink into Rylee's forearm.

Back home, I never hurt my family's staff. If I had, I'd probably get locked in the basement for weeks, maybe months.

Here, it doesn't matter what I do.

My freedom's already gone.

He'll hurt me without ever telling me why.

Might as well fight to get my answers.

"I'm your boss's fiancée." Naked and not so vulnerable anymore, I latch onto the other woman's forearm. I hold them right where they are and break skin. "Tell me."

A dark, ominous presence enters the room.

Everett's behind me. I don't see him, but I feel him.

The air is thick with his authority, with the unrelenting threat that rolls off my future husband in waves.

I bury my nails deeper into the shrieking women's arms.

"No," I say, my stupid chin quivering. I bite my tongue before I go on. "No. Go away. I don't want you here. I don't have to see you until the wedding."

"I'm not going anywhere, princess." His voice coils around my lungs, suffocating me. "And I suggest you release them. Right now. Don't let me repeat myself."

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8

AURORA

Heat prickled at the back of my neck. The unnerving sensation made my heart pound faster, louder.

Someone was staring at me while I was waiting for my drink. My whiskey.

At the Royalty's mansion, age and rules never mattered. I could drink because my parents said so, but only one glass, so I wouldn't embarrass them. Of course.

The main gathering hall was gorgeous, but the aesthetics had never been my problem. High ceilings, soft light, heavy wood, and leather furniture arranged in an effortlessly elegant way.

Stunning.

The people, though… I couldn't stand them.

Underhanded deals were conducted behind closed doors down the hall. Respectful men and women from all across the country revealed their true character—thieves, liars, and manipulators.

All in the name of power. Of wealth.

Of greed.

What made me hate them the most was that they acted as if my situation were perfectly normal. A girl who hardly ever left her home. Who hadn't attended college. Who'd done time, for fuck's sake.

Not one of them had ever asked me why. I wasn't allowed to tell them, anyway.

Nevertheless. Being noticed as more than the daughter of *would've been nice.*

Even Stafford, who always seemed kind, never bothered to ask.

He wasn't the one watching me now though. Nothing about Stafford screamed intense.

"Thank you." Numb as ever, I accepted the drink from the gray-haired bartender.

"You're very welcome." Quickly, he moved on to Susanna Hale, Stafford's mom. A blonde woman with feline-looking gray eyes. She was about my parents' age and wouldn't spare a glance my way.

No surprise there.

I took a sip of my whiskey, refusing to wallow. The expensive drink tasted rancid on my tongue. Burned down my throat.

And the eyes at my back were still there.

The feeling of being watched, I couldn't shake it off.

The person staring at me did so intently. I knew without seeing them that they did.

Their glare was like hands running over my pale blue gown. Like having someone fist my chignon and pull.

I let the whiskey roll on my tongue again.

Not their hands. His.

The only person who hadn't approached me with a polite hello before dismissing me—or a hey there! *like Ivy Bernard would greet me with—was Everett Alder.*

Judge Everett Alder, as Mom mocked his title behind closed doors. She'd thought he was being ridiculous. That there was more power and prestige in running his multi-million-dollar law firm than being a so-called public servant.

As if locking me up hadn't been the most ridiculous thing anyone had ever done.

There was no point in telling her that.

No point in mentioning that at least Everett wasn't hurting his children, since he didn't have any.

But the differences between them didn't end there.

As cold and sullen as he was over the few times I'd seen him, I could tell he was a better man than she and Dad could ever be.

My stomach fluttered whenever his name was mentioned. My pulse skittered.

He wasn't as bad as the rest of them. The man who must've been staring at me that day.

I let my eyes close as I imagined what he looked like, then and there.

His thick eyebrows lowered. Sculpted jaw clenched. Skin taut over high, mouthwatering cheekbones.

Hate must have bled from his gray eyes. Same hate he'd always aimed at me and my parents.

That intensity had made me wet between my legs. Every year without exception.

The need to see, rather than just feel, the weight of his gaze was a pressure in my chest. Too big to be contained inside my body.

He'd never approached me.

What difference would it have made if I'd turned around to stare back at him?

None.

Or so I believed when I spun to meet his stare.

Our eyes clashed. Locked.

The air drained out of the room.

It hurt everywhere, the fury and maybe-lust that he unleashed on me.

The dark magic was broken when Stafford walked up to him.

Everett turned away from me.

Leaving me alone. Again.

I might have been disappointed back then.

Now, my bones tremble with fear. He won't ever turn from me.

I'm bound to this man. Forever subjected to his wrath. His sick desires.

While I've been trying to regain control of my breath, he's moved in front of me. To where I can see him.

Every ounce of his razor-sharp attention cuts straight through me. I have to swallow a scream. Have to catch myself before clenching my thighs. He'll see it, even if the bubbles cover most of my body.

I can't let him.

He can never find out that I'm *this* close to breaking down and just letting him have his way with me.

He's the devil. A very attractive, tempting devil.

Gray slacks fall over lean thighs. The sleeves of his white dress shirt are rolled up over muscular forearms. Tattoos I've never seen before. Initials, vines, and roses are etched over accentuated veins and muscles.

My God, and his hand, his long, elegant fingers, it's hard to look away.

Only until he clears his throat, reminding me of what those fingers did to me.

They were on me after he'd knocked me out. They put the butt plug in my ass. Pressed the button to send electricity through my body.

"What's the matter, future hubby?" My voice is choked out as I return my gaze to his face.

My two captives remain locked in my unrelenting grip. "Pissed that you can't zap me to death?"

He raises an eyebrow, completing the hot jerk look he has going on.

I won't be intimidated by him. I won't get wet for him either.

"I have other ways to hurt you." He crosses his arms over his chest.

Another threat. It's always a threat with him. I gulp, hoping he doesn't notice.

"Creative ways. With or without electricity, you could be out cold in seconds."

Though my collar is off, I feel his warning on my throat. Imagine his hands on either side of my neck, using just enough pressure. He'd deprive me of just enough air.

I'd faint.

I'd be at his mercy.

Sure, he's obscenely handsome. Commanding. Hot.

My body reacts to him, despite the danger he poses. But it'd be really dumb of me to give him so much power over me again.

At least when I'm up, I have a fighting chance.

"Fine." I release both women.

They exhale in relief, their feet shuffling behind me.

"Oh!"

I turn in time to see Rylee slipping.

"I've got you." Elena catches her by her waist, steadying her.

"Are you two done here?" How the fuck can he manage that? Sounding authoritative and nonchalant when I'm burning up inside?

"Yes, sir." Elena's voice is meek.

Both women have their hands clasped in front of them, waiting for his orders. When I look at my future husband, I find him staring right at me. “We waxed her first.”

“You what?” I whisper-shout.

As I push away bubbles, my eyes cut downward.

Sure enough, my pussy is smooth. My armpits are too. My nails, they’re—

“We gave her both a manicure and pedicure, per your orders,” Elena says. Her apologetic tone reveals her uncertainty about this situation.

Everett’s face is bare of any emotion whatsoever.

His rage is gone. Expression shuttered.

Well, guess what?

I’m not over this. Over being humiliated while naked and defenseless. Over getting married to someone who hates me.

I refuse to take it.

I slap a wet hand on the rim of the tub. Water droplets splash on the floor. My nipples float above water.

Nothing new for anyone in the room, apparently.

Twisting to Elena, I snarl. “Were you the one who removed the plug out of my ass?”

At my blunt question, she chokes. Coughs. Nearly trips over herself.

One more step, and she’d be in the tub with me.

Sadly, her friend returns the favor and saves her.

“Get out.” Everett’s harsh command sends both women running off.

A soft *click*, and we’re alone.

Goosebumps race up my spine. My teeth chatter. I grind them. Hard.

Everett, ever menacing and forever annoying, stays right where he is.

His presence alone feels like a loaded gun aimed at my heart.

A sexy, unreadable gun.

“What do you want?” A tiny slice of dignity is all I have left in this world. I latch onto it. Cling to it like a life raft. “You obviously hate me. Would you please tell me, once and for all, why go through with this?”

“Up.” He jerks his chin. “We’re getting married in two hours.”

I’ve been out for two hours, then. Fuck.

“No.” I shake my head. “No.”

In the quiet room, the sound of his dress shoes meeting the marble tiles is loud. Ominous.

“No, stay away. Don’t come near me.”

“Life in prison it is, Aurora.” He looms over me. I refuse to cower.

“Double jeopardy it is, Everett.” One of the women in prison taught me about that once. I can’t believe I forgot the trick that could save my life.

“Oh?” Arms crossed, his tone’s mocking.

I get up. Water sluices down my body, droplets catching on my nipples, tumbling down my waist.

Everett’s checking me out shamelessly. His heated gaze makes me feel so small. So turned on.

Then he groans, casting his menacing glare on my face.

I have to fight him. Spine straight. Arms mirroring his, crossed over my chest. Chin held high.

“Yes, oh.” My frown tugs at my lips. “I can’t be prosecuted for the same offense twice.”

The words are barely out of my mouth, and there he is. Everett, in all his menacing glory, scooping me up into his arms. I scream and kick.

He won’t let me go.

“Clever little thief,” he says over my screeching howls. His elegant clothes are soaked in water and suds. I’m punching his chest. Nothing bothers him as he carries me over to the other side of the bathroom. “Clever, but not trained. A shame, really.”

“Stop treating me like a dog, you motherfucker.” I kick my feet higher up in the air, hoping that if I wiggle enough, he’ll drop me.

“Of course you aren’t. A dog would’ve realized what’s best for him by now. You’re a spoiled brat. But don’t worry. I’ll discipline you. Better than your daddy ever did.” His gaze is fixed straight ahead. “It won’t be long before you obey. Before you behave.”

“Like hell,” I growl, slapping his face. “Double. Jeopardy. Double jeopardy! Let me out! I want out of here!”

“You can kiss that idea goodbye.”

I’m back on my feet, though I’m nowhere near being free. His two hands are firm on my hips, spinning me to look away from him.

Both of us are facing the vanity mirror. “Stealing the collar I gave you is a brand-new offense, legally speaking.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t steal it.”

“It’d look like it when I lock it around your neck.”

My chest heaves. Jaw tightening, I suppress the sound of my frustration.

“You could scream again.” He sees right through me. Must feel my skin heating beneath his palms. Bastard. “No one would come to help you. No one would believe you. And if you howl long enough to upset me, you’ll suffer.”

Desperation is a sad, pathetic state to be in. And I’m living it right now.

My eyes water. I’m expecting many more of these tears throughout the many more years I have here. As his wife.

As many as Everett decides.

“Fine.” My fingers twitch at my sides, fists clenching with barely restrained defiance. “You’ve made your point. You’re strong, powerful, and you hate me for some fucking reason—”

“Language.” The command is accompanied by his fingers digging into my skin.

Talking through the pain, I sass, “Since you’re Mister Eloquence and all?”

Everett bends my dripping body over, mashing my face to the cold vanity.

“Brat.” His hand cracks over my ass. Once, twice. Ten and twenty. I’m crying. Begging him to stop. The only response I get is, “Be a good girl and take it.”

I cry harder, because fuck. That command. His hand on the back of my neck.

His attention.

I like it.

My brain remembers that I had a thing for Everett. That I haven’t been attracted to anyone else but him, ever.

It has to be those feelings from before he kidnapped me, that’s why I’m wet. That’s why my thighs squeeze and my clit is sensitive.

The memory of him, of the man I made up inside my head, it’s messing with my head.

Clearly, this isn’t the same person I had a crush on.

Two thick fingers are shoved into my pussy and—

“What the hell?” I slam my hands on the vanity.

His glare is probing. Harsh.

“Take it.” He seethes. “You need to calm the fuck down, and I can’t fucking use the collar when you’re wet. This is all I have.”

As much as I like it, he has to stop. And I have to stop getting off on it.

“Ha. You’re doing this for me?” My feet stomping on his shoes don’t deter him.

He doesn’t even flinch when I slap his wrist. Damn him and his expert fingers.

So good. So bad too. I have to choke on every moan threatening to leave my lips.

“I am.”

“Oh, thanks. Very”—*oh God, the way he’s curling his fingers inside of me, it’s too good, I need them out*—“considerate of you.”

“Very selfish of me.” His fingers move, steady, unrelenting. In and out. In and out.

I return to gripping the edge of the vanity, breath caught in my throat. I think I’m going to die. The pressure, the shame, the unbearable awareness of my body, it’s too much.

“For the foreseeable future, I want you quiet.” While he speaks, all I can think of is *Oh, no. Oh, no. What’s this thing he’s doing with his hand?* “I want you to be my wife. You have a role to play.”

The deft touch of this stranger, my fucking captor, shouldn’t send me over the edge. I shouldn’t orgasm on his hand.

I blame his thumb on my clit. His hard cock that’s pinned to the back of my thigh.

“I hate you.” My hips move on their own as my orgasm is forced out of me. I don’t want it, but I still come. “Hate. You.”

His eyes soften for a moment.

I might have imagined it.

Since, *ouch*, I’m pulled back up by my hair. Limbless, breathy. My reflection shows flushed cheeks and dilated pupils.

Everett looks back at me through the mirror.

The beast is here.

“Are you going to hold still?” His free hand is a manacle around my throat. I can feel his cock throbbing against my ass now.

“Or what?” I taunt. “You’re going to make me *so* miserable with another orgasm?”

“Look at you,” he drawls, his hand leaving a hot trail down my body as he slides it lower. “Already begging for more. Didn’t take me long to bring you to your knees.”

His middle finger pushes between my swollen lips, pressing to my sensitive clit.

“Never. Never. Let go.” I jerk back from his touch, then realize my mistake as I push my body harder against him. I twist to the side, hoping to get away.

Another big, huge mistake.

“I said.” The roots of my hair burn at the vicious tug. My confidence shrivels at his furious expression. “Hold. Still.”

“Why?”

Why are you doing this to me? Why me? Why should I hold still if you’re just going to humiliate me further? If you’re going to make me feel things I don’t want to feel?

“I need to dry you off.” Waiting for my consent isn’t his thing. He walks forward until I’m jammed between the sink and him.

“Seriously?” That stupid orgasm. My voice is hoarse. My heart hasn’t stopped galloping. “To dry me off? So you can”—I start wriggling in his hold. His cock jerks against me—“electrocute me again?”

“No.” Everett reaches for a shelf to our right. His jaw tics as he grabs a charcoal-gray towel off it.

“Then?”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he curses under his breath. The way he towels me off is meticulous and isn’t mean at all. Who is this man? “You have a wedding to prepare for. My wedding. That means you won’t embarrass me by showing up like you just got out of bed.”

My nipples peak as he runs the towel over me. Skin heating at his attention.

Everett ignores my body’s reaction to him. He ignores me altogether by pulling back and drying off the rest of me.

Shoulders. Back. Ass. He crouches to skim the towel over my legs, and I hold still for him. Partly because it turns me on.

Or maybe being good will earn me points with him. Maybe then he’ll give me answers—a clue on how not to end up like the last girl I think he kept here.

Poor woman didn’t even make it to her wedding day.

When he stands up again, he tosses the towel into the hamper.

“Tell me, princess.” His tone is derisive as he kicks my legs apart.

“Tell you what?”

He levels me with an intimidating glare through the mirror, staying silent for far too long.

“No. No,” I growl, because fuck him for unnerving me. For putting me through this. “You know what, on second thought, I’m not telling you shit.”

He grabs another towel, ruthless as he’s shoving it between my thighs, cleaning my arousal off me. That touch is even more impersonal than before. Completely mechanical. Entirely embarrassing.

“Does it sound like I’m asking?” In a split second, the soft fabric wraps around my neck, smelling of my orgasm.

Bringing me close to him.

Choking me.

At least his fingers are nowhere near my pussy anymore. He won’t know that I’m wet for this.

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Better.” He scoffs, dropping the towel. “And as to my question. Do you think that’ll help you? Being good? Do you hope that being obedient will soften me?”

Oh, crap, he’s onto me.

“I hope you drop dead.” A manic grin twists my face. He won’t see me suffering for as long as I can help it. “For what you’re doing to me. For what you did to that other woman you won’t talk to me about.”

Silence descends on us like a dark winter cloud.

Everett pulls his lips in.

Instead of talking, he moves. A new hairbrush is in his grip, and he sets out to untangle the knots in my hair.

I have more questions than before. Like, what the hell is this?

I say nothing. I refuse to acknowledge how careful he’s being. My roots don’t sting. There’s nothing painful about this.

For some reason, my hair turns him into less of a violent piece of shit. Maybe he’s kinky. Or maybe he meant what he said, about needing me presentable.

“She isn’t any of your concern,” Everett finally breaks the silence. He pulls a drawer open, pressing me to the vanity with his hips to keep me in place while plugging in the hair dryer. “I am.”

“And you like my hair,” I try.

“No.”

“I’ll cut it all off.” My dire last attempt is pathetic. I don’t have any other choice. “Then you’ll get bored with me.”

A huff of a wicked laugh. “It’s nowhere near that simple.”

I wish he were a decent man who’d actually want to marry me for me. I’ve dreamed of him, the broody and lonely asshole, whisking me away. So many times.

Careful what you wish for.

Everett’s surprisingly good with the blow dryer. Like he could guess I wouldn’t let Elena or Rylee do it. That I’d put up a fight, and they’d lose. He’s left no room for error in his vicious plan.

Sadly, I can’t enjoy his kind treatment for a second. It’s impossible to ignore his mean expression in the mirror. His lowered brow and pinched lips.

It’s even more impossible to forget that he’ll hurt me.

Even when he pampers me like he does.

The locks of my long brown hair fall smoothly down the front of my body. They curl at the ends. He’s turning me into some kind of actual princess.

We’re almost done. After this, I’m sure he’ll be back to his asshole self.

This is my last chance to reach out to the human side of him. “Everett.”

“Shut up.” He carefully wraps the final lock around the brush.

“Did I ever offend you or something?” I hate apologizing for shit I didn’t do.

It feels necessary now. It feels like a way to his heart.

“I said.” With an arm around my waist, he guides me out of the bathroom. “Shut. Up.”

Quickly, before I can catch my breath, we get to his bed. There, a white thong, a white lace corset, and a white gown wait for me.

My wedding outfit.

Next to them is my collar, a brand-new-looking butt plug…

And lube.

A whimper escapes me.

Everett groans at that, bending me over by my hips and kicking my knees apart.

“Hands on the bed.” His tone broaches no argument. Shamefully, it sends heat down my body.

As I lean on the bed, I pray he won’t notice it, knowing he will.

“You’re learning.” Cold liquid lands on my crack. Fear sends me up on my tiptoes. “Heels on the floor.”

“I’m not your dog,” I repeat. “You can’t order me like one and expect me to heed.”

“But you will be my wife.” Everett isn’t gentle when he nudges his finger into my forbidden hole. When he drags it in and out of me. It doesn’t hurt like I thought it would, after being stretched for hours. “You’ll either obey, or be punished. It’s that simple.”

“Please.” The stretch becomes pleasurable, and no. I don’t want it to be. “Please. I’m sorry if I offended you. It hurts.” Hurts to feel this good at the hands of a monster. “I don’t like it, Everett.”

“Liar. You’re dripping.” He slides a finger over my inner thigh. Keeps finger-fucking my ass. “You’re so fucking wet that I smell you, Aurora.”

Tears line my eyes. I won’t let him see them. I won’t look back at his evil face and search for an ounce of kindness in it.

Why bother? There’s none. Any trace of compassion was lost when he stopped working on my hair.

Everett leans over to where the butt plug is. I’m quick to blink the tears away.

“Got nothing to say?” His mouth is close to my ear. His low voice is unbearably sexy.

“I do.” Nervousness has me brushing a lock of hair off my face.

The head of the butt plug nudges at my entrance.

Everett grips my hip, standing firm behind me.

I stare at our reflection, at his new emotions flashing in his eyes.

Desire. Ache.

Lies. He’s manipulating me. He doesn’t feel a thing, just like my parents.

A hateful, money and power-hungry asshole, that’s all he’ll ever be.

I’m not attracted to him. I’m not.

“Speak.”

“I hope—” *Ow!* He shoves the first inch of the butt plug inside me, that monster. “I hope the bad luck myth of seeing the bride before the wedding is true. That it’ll stick with you. That you’ll be cursed until the day you die.”

“Oh, princess, haven’t you noticed?”

The plug is fully inserted. I bite on the inside of my cheek to hide the pain of the stretch. The embarrassment. The moan that threatens to break free.

“Noticed what?” I ask when I can finally breathe.

He lifts me. The collar is around me in a matter of seconds, and no, I most absolutely haven’t missed it. Haven’t needed the reminder that I belong to him.

I don’t want to come from his fingers or the electricity ever again.

“Noticed what, Everett?”

Two fingers clamp onto my chin. My future husband looks me dead in the eye.

“I already am cursed.” His whisper is as lethal as everything about him. “Now, you will be too. For better or worse, you will.”

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9

EVERETT

My wedding is a joke. A farce.

But no matter how I feel about the ceremony, I still chose the most exclusive venue for it, the Royalty's mansion. The perfect backdrop for the show I intend to make of this day, surrounded by the people I hate most.

It's also the perfect way to solidify this union. If I'd taken Aurora to city hall, people could whisper. Winston could spread the word she was forced.

Here, in front of our so-called friends, in a place that screams wealth—screams that I care about Aurora—it'll be much harder to refute its legitimacy.

That's why I didn't settle for just marrying her here. I hired a wedding planner to drench the space in crimson and black flowers. Antique stone pews were delivered this morning, slender candles flickering between them, casting a golden light that does nothing to soften the hearts of the cruel bastards in the seats.

The Royalty. Their families. All dressed in their finest suits and gowns, watching.

At my side stands Stafford, my best man.

The priest is in attendance as well.

Everyone's waiting quietly for my bride to walk down the aisle.

My. Bride.

And then there's me, in a tux, standing at the altar.

Our marriage will be as fake as this ceremony. I know that. Aurora and I are drawn to each other, and we hate each other just as much. The rare moments when our animosity cools are probably just a trick of my imagination.

If I gave her the chance, she'd run as far from me as she could.

But I won't give her that chance. I won't let her go.

This is happening.

We're getting married.

And there's nothing anyone can do to stop it, not even the man who ruined my life, the father of the bride.

Earlier, he sent me a menacing glare when he got here. He's furious, but he's giving her to me, nonetheless.

Me, her future husband.

Fuck. That word. *Husband*. I'm still working hard to wrap my head around it.

Happiness. Marriage. Having children, bringing another life to this godforsaken world.

Once upon a time, that was the dream.

That dream is long gone. In its place, there's emptiness. Bitterness.

I'm forced to marry my enemy.

I clasp my hands in front of me, listening to the soft, melodic classical music humming in the background.

This endless wait, it's dangerous. Thoughts rise to the surface. Thoughts I shouldn't have.

She was beautiful today.

Beautiful when she let me take care of her.

Beautiful when she screamed.

Exquisite when she frowned.

Exquisite? Fuck, I'm being ridiculous.

These thoughts are even more ridiculous.

What matters is hurting her. Making her cry. Punishing her and her parents through her first, and eventually taking them down.

"You don't have to go through with this," Stafford whispers.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" My teeth are clenched so the monsters in front of me won't read my lips. "You've helped me plan this."

"I know, but now, looking at these people…" A sigh escapes him. "Doesn't feel like we're accomplishing anything. And…"

“Spit it out.”

“I don’t like it.” Another sigh. “I was wrong before. There have been enough casualties in this war, mainly you. Just let it go, man. Fuck them.”

From where my friend is standing, it makes sense.

They’re vultures, this group of people. Every last one of them.

Starting with Molly Clarke, my future mother-in-law. She sits in the front row, her blonde hair pulled back. Her gown is as green as the hateful gaze she aims at me.

Next to her is her best friend, Lina Bernard. Brown hair, blue eyes. Nothing memorable about her or her husband, Henderson.

Behind them sits Ivy, their thirty-five-year-old daughter. A six-foot-tall woman in a bright pink dress, her blonde hair cropped short like her father’s. Tanner, her husband, has his bald head glistening with sweat. This event, along with everything that has to do with the Royalty, excites him. That’s why, though he came from old money, he took her last name.

Some people can never have enough power. Or wealth.

Much like Stafford’s family. They’re on the other side of the aisle, sneaking glances behind them. Whispering in each other’s ears.

His mother, Susanna, wears a beige gown. His father, Grey, is in a blue suit. Red hair freshly trimmed, his green, narrowed eyes are aimed at me. He doubts me.

Rightfully so.

When I’m done with my revenge, there’ll be nothing left of this little group.

Two out of the four families won’t be able to sustain it.

Let it all fall apart. See if I care.

Which brings me back to Stafford’s point.

These people shouldn’t matter. I don’t even need them.

The wealth I’ve inherited and gained throughout my career could last me a million lifetimes. A fresh start in another state, country, or continent is within reach. It’s as easy as snapping my fingers.

But no, I’m not done here.

“Your family wouldn’t have wanted this for you.” Stafford is closer, quieter. He loved my family. He also cares about the living, and that’s me. “Call it off. We’ll go get wasted together.”

“No.”

“Everett. I’m begging you to reconsider.”

On the outside, he might be a carbon copy of his dad and older brothers, Arnold and Maverick, who sit behind their parents.

On the inside, he's the polar opposite. Less cutting. Far less cruel and calculating.

They hated it when he broke his trust fund at twenty-one and started a non-profit organization to help runaway girls.

They didn't understand why Lotus's disappearance affected him as profoundly as it had.

I did.

Someone killed the girl he loved and he couldn't do anything to save her. She probably died alone, and some stray dog or wild animal dragged her body off to feed its young.

Whatever pity I'd had for Aurora gets swept away by these gut-wrenching memories and speculations.

I'm the world's biggest joke for ever feeling anything but contempt for her.

"You know what my family would've wanted?" Other than the bright future that was ahead of us. "Really wanted?"

"Each other's love." Safford's desolation twists my heart.

"That. And to live." God, all three of them were good. Kind. Humble.

I miss playing tennis with my dad. The dry thwack of the ball hitting his racket. The way he'd call me "champ" when I got a shot past him.

I miss listening to Mom tell stories about our family history. How she'd tease me about having her stubbornness.

And Lotus, my only sibling. She trusted me. She trusted all of us.

I miss them.

I'll never have them again.

"Of course, but—"

"Can I give them that, Stafford?" I turn to him fully. "Can I show them how much I love them? Can I hug them?" The tightness in my chest is infuriating. It burns. "Can I bring them back somehow? Turn back time and save them?"

His shoulders slump. "You can't."

"That's right. So for the love of God, shut up," I hiss.

And then, right on cue, the "Wedding March" starts.

Aurora steps into view.

She’s in a lace bridal gown with a subtle overskirt. A sweetheart neckline. A corset. Delicate straps. The dress hugs the soft curves of her body like it was sewn onto her skin.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

She wasn’t supposed to pull it off like this, to be this mesmerizing. But she does. Even in the most understated gown my stylist could find.

Yes, I ordered her a designer dress. If I’d chosen something cheap, people would talk. They’d think I lost my fortune. These sharks can smell blood in the water from a mile away.

I didn’t want her to feel special though. The dress itself was supposed to be minimal. Unremarkable. At least that’s how it looked in the photos my stylist sent.

But now? Now it looks nothing close to understated.

Aurora stands out brighter than she ever has. The longer I watch her, the more I realize she could never fade into the background.

And her hair…soft, loose. Motherfucker, it’s perfect. She left it exactly how I styled it. Didn’t change a thing.

My teeth clench. Anger pulses through me.

I still don’t understand why I felt the urge to learn how to do her hair this morning.

Why I went through with it.

Why I softened during that call with her parents.

Ugh, fuck me. That’s a lie.

I do understand.

It wasn’t pity.

It was a need.

A need to touch her. Fuck with her.

Ruin her.

I’ve acted on these needs and gotten what I wanted. That sadness in her gaze is evident. Her slow steps tell me exactly how she feels about this wedding.

She’s wrecked, her dad too. He scowls and huffs all the way down the aisle.

“Last chance,” Stafford insists.

They approach us, and I’ve never wanted anything more than this. Than my revenge.

“Respectfully, Stafford, fuck you.”

When they’re six feet away, my eye catches something that has me seeing red. Winston holds Aurora’s arm too tight. He could be hurting her.

Aurora doesn’t flinch. Her face isn’t contorted in pain. It’s the marks on her skin that gives Winston away. Her arm is darker around where his fingers bruise her.

She’s going to be mine. I’m the only one allowed to do that. The only one who’s earned the right.

The only one to make her come after taking my anger out on her.

A vein pulses in my neck.

I’m two seconds away from charging forward and ripping her out of his grip.

Winston beats me to it. He drags Aurora faster over the last couple of feet. Practically throws her at me, the prick.

A collective murmur ripples through the pews.

She stumbles on her high heels, cursing, “Dammit.”

Heat pulses in my ears. A voice thunders inside me, shouting, “*Nobody touches what’s mine.*”

Without thinking, I jump forward to catch her, wrapping a hand around her forearm. Pulling her close.

The fall wouldn’t have killed her. My revenge wouldn’t have ended over a few bruises and a broken nose. Still, every instinct in me fought against letting Winston hurt her.

I don’t have an answer to that. Don’t care about it either.

“Thank you,” she says.

My eyes cut to her grateful ones. I drag her even closer and take a step forward.

“Don’t you dare come near her again.” There’s no mistaking the venom in my voice. Even Aurora gasps.

“I suggest you don’t either.” His lips curl into a cutting smile. I won’t think about who else could’ve witnessed this vile expression on his face. “She belongs to us. It’s only a matter of time until I get her back. I’ll be very upset if you break her somehow.”

Feelings I’ve never experienced before now stab at my chest.

I’m bleeding all across the mansion’s floor.

Hate. Disgust. And…no, never love.

You’re territorial about getting your revenge. You ache over your past. Not her.

Right.

“Sit the fuck down, Winston.” Rapist. Fucker. His blue eyes shoot daggers at me. The people behind him murmur, and I ignore them all. “She isn’t yours. She’s mine.”

“Everett.” A small hand clutches my forearm.

Heat surges at the simple touch. I hate that this feels like comfort. Like after all these years, I have someone other than Stafford at my side.

“Aww, you got the dumb little girl to fall for you?” Her dad cocks his head to the side.

He’s lucky there are witnesses surrounding us. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself. I’m this close to ripping his heart out of his chest for talking and treating her this way. He never has, not in front of us, and he’s not going to start now.

Arnold, one of Stafford’s brothers, chooses this moment to step up.

“Come on, buddy.” He tugs at Winston’s arm, pulling him back to his seat across from Molly. Neither Winston nor she seems to mind it. “It’s just a wedding. You’ll see your daughter again.”

Over my dead body.

No one’s taking my revenge from me.

I’ve earned that right.

You’ve earned her.

The voice inside my head is too soft to be grating on my nerves. The voice is wrong.

“Come on. We have our wedding to go through.” Aurora, of all people, urges me to resume the ceremony. “He isn’t worth it.”

But she is.

Shut the fuck up.

Rearranging my features, I return to my bride. Her cheeks turn bright red the moment my attention fixes on her. Her blush spreads down her neck, her chest.

“This, putting him in his place, it wasn’t for your benefit,” I whisper, my lips at her ear. “Wipe that satisfied look off your face.”

“I know, you selfish prick,” she breathes out. The words aren’t audible to anyone but me. “You want to be a big fucking man. To be the only one to hurt me. I. Know.”

My dick jerks in my pants. I want to bend her over the altar and spank her raw. I would've taken my beautiful bride right here too. Made her bleed. Put a goddamn baby inside her.

A baby I'll steal. A baby I'll use against her.

Her pain will be mine, never theirs.

I wrap my hand around her waist. "I was going to go soft on you today—"

"Liar."

"—but since the spoiled princess has a filthy mouth, guess what? You're going to get pounded."

"Fuck you." The scent of her arousal is sweet and venomous. Her desire is an aura enveloping us both.

I almost drown in it.

Almost.

Instead, I guide her to the altar.

"Dearly beloved," the priest starts after clearing his throat.

When I step away, Aurora lets go of my arm. My fingers lace through her delicate ones. A romantic gesture that's supposed to be fake.

And yet the thought of ever releasing her hand twists something in my chest. Except that's impossible. I don't love her.

I could never.

"Before we begin." The priest starts.

What the fuck?

I shoot him my most intimidating glower for this bullshit he's about to pull. I told him beforehand that *I want it short and to the point*.

Before we begin wasn't a part of the plan.

"I have to," the idiot apologizes. I open my mouth to silence him. Ignoring my murderous glare, he rushes ahead. "If anyone has something to say, speak now or forever hold your peace."

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10

EVERETT

"No one," I deadpan.

"Me," her dad shouts. In my periphery, I see the bastard rising to his feet. "Aurora was stolen from us."

"Aurora left on her own." Her small voice bounces off the high ceilings.

She sounds full of contempt.

She hates me.

And yet again, she prefers my awful treatment over her family's.

That's interesting and—

Don't care. I do not care.

"You have no right." When Winston's indignant shouting continues, Arnold places a hand over his shoulder. Winston shakes him off before storming to the aisle. "Either of you."

He's wrong. I have every right.

Aurora's fate was sealed the moment I uncovered what Winston did to my family.

I'm not letting him take her away. I'm not letting anyone else touch her.

If he thinks another man would marry Aurora, he's sorely mistaken.

She won't walk down the aisle for anyone else. Won't have anyone else's ring on her finger. Ever.

Because revenge is all I have, and I won't let him take it from me.

Loathing burns up my neck as we lock eyes, neither of us backing down.

His intentions are clear. So is my resolve.

I untangle myself from Aurora. A few long strides, and my fingers twist into his collar.

We're face-to-face, both of us breathing hard.

"I warned you." I shake the shorter man. His teeth rattle. I wish more than anything to bash them in and end this now. Except he won't get off that easy. "Aurora is off-limits. Sit your ass down and shut the fuck up. Take what's coming to you like a man."

His eyes lose focus, rage morphing into confusion at my mistake. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Fuck, I let it slip. Thinking fast, I slam him down onto the stone bench before he can ask any more questions.

"Stay put." He turns purple when I point a finger at him. "You're wasting my time. Your daughter and I have a long night ahead of us."

I could've said I have a virgin pussy to fuck.

Except that *voice*. That incessant whisper begging me not to humiliate her.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Her mother's jaw drops. Ivy snickers. Of course she does. Always watching. Always amused.

My future father-in-law looks like he's got another round in him.

"Like it or not, I'm marrying her." I'm burning on the inside, but all they see is my cold facade. "But keep wasting my time, Winston. See where that gets you."

The room falls into complete silence. No one breathes a word.

This standoff has been long coming. Years of barely controlled hate have reached a crescendo.

Over time, I let him use me, my company, my connections. I let him believe we were on the same side.

He never saw it coming. The fury in his eyes makes it clear just how blindsided he is.

The corner of my lips quirks.

God, hurting him tastes even sweeter than humiliating Aurora.

"You'll pay for this." His snarl is ugly. Pathetic.

I smooth my tux jacket and stand a few inches taller. "Oh, someone will be paying tonight."

When I look over my shoulder, instead of paling at the threat, my bride flushes red. Her tongue darts to lick her full lips.

Poor thing, thinks I'm her savior.

Tonight, she'll learn exactly who I am.

I'm back at her side as if nothing's happened.

"Get to the vows already," I bark at the priest. I don't even glance his way. My focus is on her. Her chin is in my grip, my shadow casting over her much smaller frame. I squeeze slightly, reminding her and everyone else who's in control. "Or you can leave, knowing that this is the last wedding you'll ever ornate."

The priest huffs. "I haven't done anything wrong—"

"Get. To. The. Vows."

Aurora shivers at my hissed words, and my desire for her spikes. This is going to be one hate-fuck I'll savor for the rest of my life.

The ceremony continues. Our priest discusses concepts such as eternity, love, and for better or worse.

I swallow down my opinions about that bullshit.

It's easy enough to do.

I have Aurora to look at. She's in my grip. Soft and supposedly innocent. Her quickened breaths and her parted lips are mouthwatering.

"Vows." The command spits out of me.

Frown marks appear between Aurora's eyebrows. I've upset her, and she wants me to know that.

I nod once. *Duly noted. I'll remember your attitude when we're alone.*

"Everett Quentin Alder." My full name. Last time I heard it was when I was appointed as a judge. "Do you take Aurora Coraline Clarke to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

My bride doesn't blink. She's trying to be brave.

It won't last. "I do."

Stafford shoves her ring into my open palm. My eyes stay on Aurora as I close my hand around her wedding band.

She's being a quiet, hateful little mouse as I slip it on her finger.

The resentment is mutual. Only that mine runs hotter. Deeper.

I have her delicate wrist in my unforgiving hold.

"You're a monster," she spits out eventually, her hate hitting harder than I expect. "It won't work. Whatever you have planned, it won't work."

The ring reaches the last knuckle, just above her engagement ring. I push it down harder, reveling in her tiny squirm. "I guess we'll have to see about that, princess."

“Aurora Coraline Clarke,” the priest cuts in. “Do you take Everett Quentin Alder to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

I outstretch my hand for Stafford, asking for the ring. When he hands it over, the damn thing burns through my palm.

In a surprising move, Aurora snatches it from me. Something wicked flashes across her features.

“For better or worse.” The wedding band is there, on my ring finger. Pushed to the last knuckle with equal cruelty. I’ll never admit that the feel of her hands on me is a turn-on. “I do.”

“I now pronounce you man and wife.” Finally, the priest gets to the end of the script. My feet move toward her. Closer. I can’t stop them. “You may kiss the bride.”

I was supposed to turn around and tug her out of here, to end this ridiculous show and get away from these people.

But the fullness of her lips. Her fingers that are still trying to bruise my wrist.

The essence of this girl.

She’s had everything while I’ve had nothing. I should loathe her, except I can’t help but breathe her in.

I need a taste of her.

My palms cup her jaw as I lean closer.

“No.” Her nose twitches. Eyes blinking furiously. “Fuck. You.”

“On every available surface in the house, wife.”

We could go on forever.

I’m not in the mood for that.

I’m in the mood to haul her against me. Tilt her face up, just enough to give me the perfect angle to crush my mouth to hers.

And kiss her.

The second my lips press to hers, reality slams into me.

I’m enjoying this. Kissing the woman I hate. The woman I have hurt and will hurt again.

I enjoy it so much I force her lips apart, my tongue sliding against hers.

A growl rumbles out of me as I let go of revenge. Just for a few seconds, I shove the past aside. I unshackle myself from the anger, from the grief that never ends.

With her mouth on mine, I shut my brain off and just kiss her.

She tastes so sweet. So mine.

This kiss that I’m reveling in earns me Aurora’s moans and fists at my chest.

Christ, it feels good.

A woman hoots and then whistles in the background. Ivy, no doubt.

The sound is the wake-up call I need.

I snap back into my body and start pulling away.

Aurora’s teeth sink into my lips. Harsh and furious.

Metal floods my tongue.

My blood.

“Bad girl.” I tear her off me as if she were a wild animal.

Her lungs heave with every breath. My blood trickles down her chin.

Adrenaline spikes through my veins.

That look, it’s as if she’s actually upset that I broke our kiss.

Soon, she’s going to miss this moment, this reprieve.

Soon, she’ll be begging me to stop.

“You’re going to regret this.” I dip down to lick my blood off this feral little thing. My lips are at her ear after that. Hand digging into her hip. “You’re going to regret the moment you were *born*, wife.”

She turns her face to me, and there’s fire in her eyes. “Try me, husband. I’d like to see you fucking try.”

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11

AURORA

Our driver slows as we pass through the gates and roll through the driveway.

My pulse spikes at the sight of the mansion looming ahead.

A punishment waits for me the moment we step inside his home. I can tell by the way Everett grips my wrist. His hand has been a shackle on me since we left the altar.

Shamefully, I don't hate his touch as much as I should. On the drive and even now, I've been stealing glances at where his fingers wrap around my wrist.

The rings he slipped on me have stolen just as much of my focus. Two extra shackles that bind me to him.

Anyone else might feel special wearing them. They'd admire their partner's thoughtfulness, marvel at the beauty and the cost.

But I know better than to mistake this for love.

The rings. His grip. This whole ceremony.

They're not gifts. They're threats, delivered one after the other.

Aurora is off-limits.

His words ring in my ears. The ones he spat at my father.

Everett was fearless. A beast protecting what was his, even if what's his is something he hates.

He made me feel safe. *Safer*, to be exact.

Next to him, my adoptive parents could never hurt me.

And as much as Everett would like to believe that he's the worst monster in my life, he isn't.

Back home, despair followed me around no matter where I went.

Here, there's desire.

No hope, there's none of that here either. Yet I'd still choose this prison over the other one any day of the week. The lesser of two evils.

Maybe one day, freedom will be within reach.

Maybe.

As if sensing my thoughts, Everett clamps his hand harder around my wrist.

I gulp and shake my head, then look out the window.

Night had started to fall while my fate was being sealed to another man's. The recessed lawn lights barely reach the car's interior.

Soon enough, the car will idle. Real dread will flood in.

The front door is right there, up ahead. It's already open. One of the staff members is waiting for us at the doorway.

You're going to regret the moment you were born, *wife.*

Fueled by adrenaline, I told him he could try me.

Adrenaline surges through my veins, sharpening every sense. Both fear and bravery cling to every pore of my body.

Everett brushes his thumb along the inside of my wrist, a poor attempt to fool me.

I won't let my guard down, only to be crushed behind closed doors later.

What I should expect is torture. Pain. Punishment.

He might fuck me to my literal death.

Maybe that's what happened to *her*.

My heart beats faster at that.

Her. The one who might've been here before me.

The one he might've killed. Maybe he was too rough and accidentally ended her life…

Oh God.

Oh my fucking God.

I swallow down the bile rising in my throat.

"We're here, sir."

The driver's announcement snaps me out of my debilitating thoughts.

Fight or flight, Aurora. What will it be?

A mixture of both, I guess.

But I'll start with *fight*.

As soon as the engine stills, I reach for the remote in Everett's pants pocket.

If shoplifting taught me anything, it's how to be quick and efficient with my hands.

I know, I know. Shoplifting and pickpocketing aren't the same thing. But good sleight of hand is crucial when your menacing bodyguard watches you like a fucking hawk.

My fingers curl around Everett's plastic remote and—*yes*. I have it in my grip.

Before I can snatch it away, his hand locks over mine, almost hard enough to break my bones.

Except I know it's not my broken bones he's after. It's something far worse.

His plans for tonight are clear in his wicked gaze. Darkness and lust blend in him, making it hard to speak. To breathe.

"Don't. Don't push my finger. Don't you make me press that button and zap myself." My eyes are on Everett's and I swallow hard. "Don't do…*it*… to me while I'm out."

My fingers clamp tighter around the remote that's still in his pocket, careful not to hit the damn button. I tell myself my pounding heart has nothing to do with the solid muscle of his thigh beneath my hand.

"Little thief." His low voice is gravelly. Bone-chilling. It alerts me just to how much danger I'm in, and I hate how it turns me on. "Let go."

"Never." As forcefully and quickly as possible, I snap my hand back, holding the remote out of his reach.

"Hand it over." He could lean forward and pluck it out of my grasp, but it's obvious that he'd rather I submit. "Or there'll be consequences."

"Hmm." Talking back always landed me harsher punishments. But I'm not going down without a fight. "Since there'll be consequences no matter what I do, my answer is going to be…no."

His lips quirk in a small, awful smirk.

Heat pools between my thighs. My own body turns on me, reacting to him even as my mind screams in protest.

He's going to use my arousal against me.

No.

No.

“Don’t come anywhere near me!” I use the remote as a weapon, landing a blow on his shoulder.

Wide eyes betray his shock, giving me another second to do *this*. *Bam. Bam. Bam.* I slam the remote down on his hand, the one that’s locked around my wrist.

The swift blows work their magic. His fingers open.

I’m freed.

Momentarily.

A moment is all I need, anyway.

I slide out of the car, sprinting toward the front door.

“Aurora!” Dress shoes pound on asphalt behind me.

I need to lock myself up in a room. Any room.

A few hours on my own. A night. It could be what saves me from the worst of Everett.

Once his anger settles, once our back and forth from the ceremony isn’t as vivid in his head, I might have a chance of surviving this. Him.

He’ll still fuck me, no doubt about that.

He’ll still take from me.

But maybe it won’t hurt as much.

Maybe I won’t pass out from being pounded by a savage.

What was I thinking? Challenging him?

Idiot.

Nothing to do about it now but run.

The late-night breeze whips at my hair. My heels click on the driveway the faster I run.

I lift the skirt of my dress with my free hand. The damn thing still swishes against the floor.

The woman from his staff steps aside as I rush up the stairs. Her face is blank, unreadable. “Mrs. Alder.”

My new name. I yelp at the sound of it.

Then sprint as if my life depends on it.

Everett’s on my heels. I hear the loud thump of his footfalls. The fire he breathes.

Other than that, he’s silent.

Somehow, that’s worse than hearing him threaten me.

Faster. Faster.

The stairwell, I’m there, rushing up to the second floor. Taking the stairs two at a time.

The room he locked me in yesterday is as good as any to hide from Everett. The heavy armchairs, I’ll drag them to the door. I’ll barricade myself inside the room.

Yes. Yes, *yes*, *yes.*

“Aurora, stop where you are,” he commands. The authority in his voice raises the hair along the back of my neck. “Now.”

As much as I’m attracted to him, I won’t stop for anything.

Newfound determination surges through me. The burning in my lungs pushes me forward instead of slowing me down.

“You’re going to regret this.” As I reach the landing, Everett’s fingers brush against a lock of my hair.

A scream fills my ears. It’s mine, loud and terrified, as I dash forward at breakneck speed.

Heart, stay with me. We’ll rest once we’re safe.

There, there. I’m inside the room, spinning to shove the door closed.

After closing the door, I reach for the closest armchair. Drag it like I planned, so it’s pressed against the door.

I angle it, and—perfect. The door handle is secure.

“Go.” I adjust the armchair when Everett starts shaking the handle. “Away.”

“Wife.” His deceptively alluring tone rattles me to my core.

“Forced!” I scream, pushing the entire weight of my body against the door. “You forced me to marry you.”

“You’re my wife, nonetheless.” His fist slams on the heavy wood, and I shriek. “Open the fuck up.”

“Tomorrow.” I gulp in air, begging my heart to settle. “Go to bed, Everett.”

“You’re forgetting your place.” The second pound on the door is awful. It’s not a threat anymore. It’s a vow. “If you don’t open up within the next ten seconds, I’ll set this room on fire. Hell, I’ll set this whole place on fire with you in it.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“You’d make a beautiful corpse.” This part, it sounds like he’s lying.

Like he’s saying it to scare me. Like he’s doing it to turn me on.

“I won’t call 9-1-1. I’ll let this whole place burn to the ground, then fuck my fist and come all over your remains.” He’s coming at me with everything he’s got, but for all his bravado, it sounds like an empty threat. “You’d be a mess of charred bones and cum.”

“You’re disgusting.” I shiver. I heat up despite the horrible images Everett plants in my head.

Hating myself and him, I take the butt plug out—*ouch*—and move back, then throw it against the door.

“And you’re a brat.” Through the barrier between us, I hear him sucking in a sharp breath. I imagine his large shoulders tensing. His jaw ticking. “Five. Four.”

My thong was soaked when I pulled out the butt plug. Shamefully, I wipe my wet, quivering hand over my dress.

“Three.”

No, no. I won’t let him in here. He’s in the worst mood.

My first time won’t be like this. With a man who hates me.

“Two.”

Tears brim in my eyes. Streak across my cheeks.

He’ll get in if he wants to, the man who’s more of a monster.

“No.” I stand here, shuddering and turned on. “No.”

“One.”

Deflated, I shove the chair aside, the scrape of wood on wood loud in the silence.

A moment later, Everett presses the handle down and pushes the door in.

Watching a rabid lion waiting in the doorway would’ve been a lot less scary than this. My heart lurches up to my throat.

My face goes completely numb.

I was right. His jaw does tic.

His lips are white, pressed together so tightly.

His tux jacket is gone. The sleeves of his white shirt are rolled up, exposing strong forearms. Vivid tattoos.

Furious, pumping veins.

“I opened the door.” This last Hail Mary is me trying to talk sense into him.

“The first time I asked?”

“N-no.” A step back makes no difference.

There could be a hundred miles between us, and Everett would be just as powerful. As formidable. As determined to hurt me.

To take me.

His gaze cuts to the floor, to where I dropped the butt plug. It's used. Pathetic. Just like I'll be after tonight.

My stomach twists, humiliation burning across my skin as he picks it up by the clean end and gives it a quick look.

Then he tosses it aside and straightens to his full height.

"Please." My thighs press together at how arousing this is.

My pussy aches for his touch. My whole body does.

In another life, I would've run into his arms. Hugged him, kissed him.

I would've given him my virginity, not been terrified of him taking it.

But in this one, my heart is already shattered.

What's wrong with him?

What's wrong with me?

"Who am I to you?" He closes the door softly behind him, and this muted click, it's the worst. It means he's in control of himself. That he knows what he's doing. What he's going to do. "Answer me, princess."

"My kidnapper."

That earns me a raised eyebrow. A dark smile. "Cute. Try again."

"My monster." The backs of my knees hit the bed. My breath hitches.

Everett's focus lands on my parted lips.

"Aurora." A blink and he's there. A hand wrapped around my jaw, just above my collar. The other one disarms me of his remote. "Who am I to you?"

Every nerve in my body lights up at his closeness. His hot breath tickles my skin. His shadow is a warm, deceptive blanket sheathing me.

His voice, Jesus, his voice. It's the finest whiskey. Husky. Woodsy. Thick.

"My husband." I seethe.

"Good girl." He spins me, shoving my cheek to the bed. Kicking my legs apart.

Everett places the remote on the bed. My heart beats faster as he bunches the dress up my waist. He catches both my wrists in his firm grip, rubbing me with his thumb.

I see where this is going.

This won't be just about taking my virginity.

Stroking my pussy with his free hand, he's forcing my body to *want* it.

He's pressing buttons I never realized existed. Rubbing my wetness, turning me into a mess.

This is torture.

"No." I step on his foot, hard. He doesn't budge an inch. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone!"

"Who are you to me?" His lips brush against my cheek. His body crowds mine. Fingers stroking faster. "Don't keep me waiting."

The somewhat civil man who did my hair earlier today is long gone.

I'm in hell. Married to Lucifer.

The devil who hates me.

"Your wife." My tears are salty on my tongue as I speak.

"That's better. Stay."

Again, he treats me like a pet. Again, my nipples harden, grazing the bed. It isn't his command that makes me stay, it's this insufferable lust.

Through my tears, I watch Everett use the long white strip he tore off my dress. He stretches it, his cruel eyes assessing the length.

"It'll do," he says to himself. Then he grabs my hands, binding my wrists together.

He's careful about it. Ties me up without cutting the blood supply.

Shame for getting wetter and needier rushes over me as my tears dry. A part of me believes that Everett's soft handling will last. That deep down, he's kind. Sweet.

I *should* be ashamed. Because he isn't.

He grabs the remote once he's done.

Pushes the button.

A tiny jolt of electricity starts in my throat. My mouth clamps shut.

"A reminder—" His hand cracks on my ass, and I whimper.

I try to press my body forward, away, but there's no place to hide. Nowhere to run.

Do I even want to be anywhere else? I should.

"—Of what happens when you don't listen to me."

"Why are you doing this?" I grit out.

"I already told you."

"You couldn't appreciate your freedom, little thief." At some point, my knees must've closed. He kicks them apart again, his hands rough and hot. "That's how we got here. That's why I own you now."

“Freedom?” Such a fierce blow, his misconception of me. The fact that no one’s bothered or cared enough to see I’m a prisoner hurts as if it’s the first time I’ve felt it. “What freedom?”

My scream gives Everett pause. The lines on his forehead deepen with a look of confusion.

His hesitation is momentary before he strikes me with his words. “You’re just like them. A liar.” The gaze he pins me with freezes my blood. “Stay. Take it. Or you wouldn’t like the consequences.

Stupidly, I snarl at him. “Your threats are as empty as your soul.”

“Are they really?” My thong is torn from my body. Cool air brushes my wet, heated parts.

His eyes are dark. I try to give him a stare that says *I hate you*.

I don’t really hate him. I wish I could.

Crack. A slap to my pussy this time.

“I hate you!”

Crack. Crack. Crack.

“You bastard.”

Despite the nauseating pain, pleasure slices through me.

He’s touching me in places no one ever has. He’s owning me, his wedding band cold against my pussy as he keeps smacking it.

Crack. Crack. Crack.

That’s my ass he’s spanking now. He’s going at it over and over again.

I have to bite my cheek to keep from screaming.

Have to hold it together so I don’t come.

Breathe, Aurora. Breathe.

I try.

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12

AURORA

"Are you sorry yet?"

"Sorry? What for?" The screech coming out of me is that of a wounded animal. "Why are you punishing me? The real reason. You owe me that."

"I owe you nothing."

Being spanked has taken everything out of me. Everything other than this sickening desire.

It hasn't affected Everett in the slightest.

His expression is the same cruel and unbothered one. "You, on the other hand…"

Two fingers are shoved brutally inside my core. The wet sound has me wishing I could crawl into a dark hole and die of shame.

"So tight." The words are spoken through clenched teeth. The first sign that he's as affected by this as I am. "Your virginity. Your life. That's what you owe me."

"I hate you."

"And yet your pussy loves me, wife." He curls his fingers inside me. Brushes that place and—

"No." I twist my head, shoving my face into the covers. Clench my legs against the desire that shoots up my spine. He won't see this, ever. "No, no, no."

"Hmm." Everett pulls out, finds my clit, and pinches. His hard cock throbs against my ass. "How about now?"

My brain short-circuits as my climax assaults me. My whole body seizes. Muscles straining.

A second later, a tidal wave of sick relief washes over me. I'm gasping. Panting. Then I scream into the bed.

"I could've been crueler." I hear a package rip, hoping for a condom.

Mom packed my birth control pills, but I wouldn't be surprised if someone as powerful as Everett could still impregnate me.

I shouldn't want his baby.

I want to be free.

"Could've fucked you without preparation." The flat tone of his voice has me clenching my thighs tighter.

I shouldn't look back. Shouldn't see him stripping.

A twisted part of me is painfully curious. Each breath I take is laden as I slowly turn to look at him.

And…his clothes haven't come off.

"Unlike you and your family…"

Before, he wasn't tearing a condom pack.

The tearing sound was from a packet of antiseptic swabs. He's cleaning the new butt plug.

"I'm not heartless." I hate that it feels like he's taking care of me. "I prepped your virgin cunt for my cock. You should be thanking me."

He's right. About everything.

Instead of being thrown into a basement, I'm here. In his room. I've been sleeping in a comfortable bed.

He even made me come. Made me consider giving myself to him, despite everything.

Molly and Winston have never offered me a sliver of kindness. A hint of emotion other than contempt and hatred.

Being free would be better than my current situation.

But I can't deny that Everett's ministrations are the closest thing to affection I've ever felt.

I blink back tears. Because how fucking sad is that.

"No thank you?" Everett spits on my ass, then rubs it into my hole, wringing a yelp out of me. "It's all right. You'll learn. I'll grind gratitude into your bones."

The butt plug slips inside me, as if Everett's being careful not to tear anything. Doesn't change the fact that I have a plug in my ass.

“Go to hell,” I cry out, seething. Horrified by the heat spreading through me. “God, I hate you.”

“What gives you the impression I care?”

Bastard.

His hand knots in my hair, dragging me close—gorgeous, evil, filling my vision as he wipes his fingers clean.

I wait until he’s close enough, then sink my teeth into his lip—hard, until the copper tang of his blood coats my tongue. His growl rumbles into my mouth, vibrating through me like static.

“Bad girl.” He slams my face to the bed, then pulls back. “Bad fucking girl, Aurora.”

At his feral glare, fear and arousal almost paralyze me.

Almost.

“Oh, hubby, are you crying because I wounded you?” I lick my blood-coated lips, watching his nostrils flare. “What gives you the impression *I* care?”

He grabs the remote off the bed, doesn’t give me a second to prepare before he clocks the button.

A small smirk plays on his lips as I swallow down a scream.

“I’ll give you something to care about.” Standing between my spread legs, Everett removes his belt. Undoes his pants.

“Stop.”

His intimidating cock is hard in his hand. The tip glistens.

He’s a beautiful man. With a beautiful dick.

What he’s about to do to me won’t be beautiful at all.

Nevertheless, I’ll want it. My body craves this already. Needs to break for him.

Knowing that I shouldn’t is what’s tearing me apart.

“I’d tell you to relax.” The stretch, just from the tip of his cock lined up and pressing into my pussy, is unbearable. “That it’d hurt less that way.”

I fight against my restraints. Squeeze my thighs. Nothing gets him to back off. Nothing hinders my desire for him.

“But yeah. You’re a brat. You won’t listen anyway, will you?”

“I’ll kill you.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

One shove. Swift and lethal.

My mouth drops open as something rips from within me.

I’m being pushed beyond my limits, with him so deep. He’s so big.

I feel myself soaking him. My nipples are so fucking sensitive I could die.

He’s pressed up against me, his fingers buried in my hips.

“Everett.” I think I’m going to faint. I’m definitely going to cry from being even remotely aroused by this. “Get out.”

Everett isn’t getting out. He isn’t fucking me either.

He stands still.

With my head turned, cheek pressed to the bed, I glance back and catch his face looming over me. His eyes lock on mine, watching my face intently while his cock pulses inside me.

It’s the first time I’ve ever been with a man, but I’m not naïve. I know what desire is, because it’s pounding through me just as much.

The energy in him is volatile, crackling against my own ache, my helplessness.

I don’t want to crave this man who stole my virginity. I want him gone.

“I—” I start. Stop. I wish I knew what to say, or better yet, how to silence this filthy need clawing at me. “This is—”

“This is me fucking you. And you’re going to come for me.” His bloodied lips give him a primal, monstrous smirk.

I shouldn’t be hot for it.

I really shouldn’t.

A sob catches in my throat. At the lie I’m about to say. “I don’t want to come for you.”

“You will.” He gets off on torturing me, his voice low and satisfied.

My misery is a thrilling challenge for Everett.

“Never.” I won’t admit I’m hot for it too. I can’t be.

Can’t like it, how he thickens inside me. Being pinned down. The degradation. The unbearable sting.

I hate him.

“This pussy.” He draws back, every thick inch of him marking me from the inside. “Is mine.”

Slam. He’s back in me, up to the hilt.

“Never yours.”

“Keep fighting me.” He pulls out. An ounce of relief is all I’m allowed before he chases it with dark pleasure.

“Oh God.” I’m begging him to stop. Begging my body not to come from this.

“Please.” It’s a word. A breath. His thrusts steal those from me too. “Please.”

“Call me God again.” The vein in his neck bulges.

I’m being claimed like I’m actually his possession, over and over and over.

“Call me God…” My climax winds tighter in my stomach with every stroke of his cock. “And I just might have *some* mercy on you.”

“Fuck”—*gasp*—“your”—*moan*—“mercy.”

Everett’s response is his relentless thrusts beating my pussy from the inside. His hand comes around me, between my thighs.

“No, no, please.” His fingers find my wetness, parting my lips. Rubbing my clit. He’s making being forced feel so good. “Stop it. Stop it. I said I don’t want to come for you.”

Sharp teeth bite into my shoulder. His hot breath, his skilled tongue. They’re teasing me.

He bites and licks and sucks until I’m bucking against him. Until I can’t stand it.

This orgasm…it’s so intense. I’m about to lose my mind.

The butt plug is in my ass to ensure that I won’t be able to escape any of this. This pain. This fullness.

“Come.” He’s rubbing me faster. In circles. Tapping on my sensitive clit as he pounds me from behind.

“No.” This spot, he’s hitting over and over again. I can’t take it. “I won’t come for you. You do nothing for me. Nothing.”

“Stop being such a fucking brat for one second and”—*thrust*—“come all over”—his hips slam against my thighs—“my”—he groans, melting my insides—“cock. Fucking milk me.”

In his weakest moment, when he’s hanging over the edge, I hear a crack in his voice. A need.

My husband means to hurt me with his demeaning words. He’s trying to be cruel. He can’t.

And that’s the worst part of it all. I can’t unhear it now, the human side of him. It’s there, in how he’s railing me slower now. His fingers and each stroke of his dick inside me. Each time he demands entrance, my will to fight him withers.

I’m useless. Powerless.

And yet I’m special to him. I feel it, even if he’ll never say the words.

“Fuck,” I curse. I come so violently that Everett groans into my skin.

“That’s it.” His pounding is unlike before. Erratic. Harsh. Making me one with the bed. “Taking your punishment like such a good girl. Such a little slut. Begging for my cum.”

“I’m not—”

Then he lifts me, just a little, by my hair, angling my head until his face hovers above mine. When Everett kisses me, it’s possessive. Claiming.

This time, it’s his turn to bite my lip, making me bleed.

Sick arousal has my cheeks heating up so my nipples pull tight.

I moan and cry out as he sucks my blood into his mouth. I stare at him, wide-eyed, when he tips my face up and spits his blood and mine into my mouth.

Before I can spit it back at him, he pushes my face back to bed and clamps my mouth shut.

“Swallow.”

Too floaty to argue, I gulp down his spit. My blood.

It’s like he’s making me take more than his cock. He’s showing me how possessive he is of me. How I’ll never get away.

Shame stings me everywhere when I admit that I want him too.

“That’s it.” He’s an animal, ramming into me. “Going to fill you up, wife. Going to get you pregnant. I hope you’re ready.”

“No.” Fresh tears roll down my cheeks when he spills himself inside me. Pregnant? I don’t want to get pregnant. I definitely don’t want to come again. “No.”

But I do. I can’t stop wanting this.

“Yes.” As if he handles sobbing women on a daily basis, Everett pulls out of me in a way that isn’t painful.

He’s just as gentle when he releases me from my binds.

“Come here.” He flips me over, carrying me to the edge of the bed.

Settling me there, on my side.

My eyes widen. First, from this strange gentleness. Then, from the sight of his blood-soaked cock.

My virginity is on him.

His face is nothing but sharp edges. Possessiveness rolls off him in waves as he strokes his still-hard dick. As he coats his hand with my

hymen.

“Go away.” My body betrays me. Despite my words, every muscle, every cell, strains toward Everett, aching for more. “Leave me the fuck alone.”

“Don’t think so.” My eyes squeeze shut, but I sense him there. His fingers gather his cum from my thighs, pushing it back inside me. “You need this.”

“Your babies? Your cock in my mouth? No.” Though I close my lips, he pushes the head of his cock past them. “Mm-mm. Mm-mm.”

“You’ll have my babies. And they’ll be just that—mine.”

The meaning behind it horrifies me, and if I weren’t already drowning in everything else, I probably would’ve cried.

“And putting my cock in your mouth…” he pulls his lips in. “You need it to calm down. And because you made this mess. Now you’re going to clean it up and don’t you dare bite me.”

There’s a softness slipping into his tone again, and I don’t know what to make of it.

What if it’s a trick, a way to exploit my weakness?

Does he regret any of this? I can’t tell.

“Open wider.” He grabs my jaw with a hand that’s dirty from our arousal. “Wider, I said.”

Exhaustion curls around me, pulling me under in what feels like a swift tug.

I’m tired of fighting. Tired of trying to understand him.

For tonight, I’m tired, period. I release the hold I’ve had on my lips. Let him shove himself into my mouth.

It’s dirty and wrong.

It isn’t disgusting, sucking on him like this. Tasting my blood and our cum.

Strangely, it’s comforting. My body relaxes, my tears slowing.

“I wish I could hate you,” he murmurs.

At least I imagine he did, in my drowsy, helpless state. And I imagine other things too, with my eyes fluttering shut.

His fingers running through my hair. Over my bite mark. My bare arms. Gentle. Kind. Soft. Him, standing firm in place and just letting me have him.

He isn’t demanding that I lick and clean him up again. That part I’m definitely not imagining.

Strange. Impossible too.

He can’t be doing something sweet for me.

I’ll worry about it tomorrow. Tonight, I let the weight of his cock on my tongue lull me to sleep.

Right before I doze off, he pulls out. I hear his zipper, his footsteps, and then he’s back with a warm washcloth. Everett wipes my thighs and pussy. Feels *so* nice.

The pressure of the butt plug is no more.

Now I’m sure I’m dreaming this, this momentary truce.

I’m taking it, anyway.

I’ll take a dream. A lie. Anything over this life.

Over my unwanted existence and the monsters roaming around me.

Sleep. I want that.

Blissful. Unconscious. Painless.

Sleep.

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EVERETT

Jlock my fingers around her arm, squeezing the soft flesh.

This is how I wake Aurora on her first morning as my wife. Standing at her bedside, being harsh, cold, cruel.

As I should be. As I should've been last night.

We're both better off this way.

This is how neither of us forgets our place, the roles we play in this game.

I'm her tormentor. She's here to take her punishment for simply existing.

That's all there is to this marriage.

Our wedding night was a mistake. A glitch. For a short while after I came inside her, I wasn't myself.

Couldn't be.

Aurora's last tears spoke to a part of me I'd considered dead long ago. My heart gave the strangest squeeze.

Then I comforted her by letting her fall asleep with my cock in her mouth.

It wasn't a conscious thought, I just assumed that her full might steady her, might anchor her long enough for the panic to drain away.

Eventually, it worked. Her eyes drifted shut. Her crying simmered into shallow breaths.

Without my permission, my fingers stroked through her soft locks.

It was a mistake on my part.

Because during the thirty minutes I spent as her human pacifier, staring at the mascara smeared down her cheeks, I had time to consider her.

Us.

If she were a stranger and not some princess who spent most of her life hiding in her home, maybe I could've met her in a restaurant.

She'd be sitting at another table, laughing. Blushing when she caught me staring at her. I wouldn't be able to look away, my gaze dark, full of intent, until I'd break and walk over to her and demand her number.

These thoughts are pointless. We didn't meet in some random place. And I couldn't be in love with her.

You're weak, I said to myself, and proceeded to remove her collar then get in the shower with her. We both had our rings on the entire time.

Weak, I screamed inwardly as I dressed her in new clothes I'd ordered just for her.

Finally, I listened to that voice and acted.

Lounge clothes? Comfort? No fucking more.

Instead, I fastened the collar back around Aurora's neck and chose something revealing for her to wear. A black lace nightgown, sheer and short, barely covering her ass.

The garment wasn't cheap. It wasn't humiliating on its own.

It was a lesson. A reminder that Aurora couldn't hide from me.

But the nightgown wasn't enough.

She still looked vulnerable.

Soft.

I wanted to hug her.

So I tied her to the headboard.

Being a bastard made it easier to push the warmth aside, along with the word *mine*.

I went to bed beside her soon after. There was no comfort in it. There was nothing at all, really. I was as empty as ever.

Hatred rose on its own, same as always, when her dad called earlier this morning. I sent him straight to voicemail. Showered. Dressed.

I feel better now, simmering in anger, my most loyal companion. "Aurora."

"Mmm." She's out of it, turning her face away from me.

"Wake. Up." I cup her jaw, shaking her head.

Blue eyes flutter open. Confusion clouds them first.

Then recognition.

“No. No.” Aurora flinches. Kicks her heels until she rips herself from me and is seated in bed, her back up against the headboard. Arms straining. “Stay the fuck away.”

She growls, as if she woke up ready to fight.

Her hair is as wild as the glare she’s shooting at me. Her lips are curved in a snarl.

Her pink nipples and pussy are visible through the skimpy lace material.

I ache to bury my cock in her again. Over and over.

I’m also looking forward to her realizing how bare she is. That she’s bound to the headboard.

That her collar is still on her.

Eager to speed up the process, I adjust my hard dick in my jeans.

Her throat bobs at the movement.

Understanding dawns on her, and with it, a hint of terror slips into her expression.

Embarrassment too. Aurora turns her head away from me, sinking her teeth into her wounded bottom lip. Snapping her eyes shut.

“Open your eyes.” When she does, I press two fingers to her chin and tip her face down, forcing her to see what I made her wear.

Her thighs clench. Breath hitches.

A deep shade of red runs up her throat. Darkening her cheeks.

My cock jerks at that.

Humiliated and ruined, Aurora’s unable to stop herself. Her attention cuts to my jeans again.

“One night with me.” I let go of her chin, desire rolling over me as I watch her. “And you’re already such a slut for my cock.”

Emotions flash over her face. A whole rainbow on them. Fear. Lust. Loathing.

She’s an expressive one. An interesting one.

She’s a part of the worst family I’ve ever known.

I see the moment she chooses how she’s going to handle the situation.

I see it before the first bratty word leaves her lips.

“That pencil dick?” Her nose twitches with disdain. “Dream on, fucker.”

“Poor little rich girl.” She screams as I lean over to untie her left wrist. “Guess I’m not done teaching you manners.”

Her right wrist is freed too. I check on them regardless. Being inconspicuous as I run my thumb over each, once.

She can never know I care.

“What? Why?” More screams pierce my ears when she’s up in my arms. This half-naked woman’s limbs flail as I carry her to the bathroom. “What manners? Where are you taking me? Put me down!”

We’re in the bathroom when I do just that.

Dump her unceremoniously onto the floor.

Her feet barely touch the tile. My hand finds her throat before she breathes.

I groan at the feel of her collar. The leather against the side of my palm.

The absolute control I have over her.

“What do you mean?” she prods, her whisper choked.

This woman is intoxicating. Her fear. Her tremors. Her failed attempts at fighting me.

Every part of her speaks right to my cock.

“Let’s see.” I flip her to face the mirror, yanking her back against me, my hips grinding into her ass. “Between your screaming fits and constant shoplifting, I doubt you’ve ever had a real taste of the civilized world. Lucky for you, I’ll show you what it means to function like a human being.”

That’s a lie. I couldn’t care less how she carries herself around other people. I just get off on punishing her.

Her lips pinch. Nostrils flare. The creases lining her smooth forehead are incredibly satisfying.

“You might remember this part of the house. It’s called a bathroom.” With one hand, I undo the button on my jeans, lower the zipper, and take my cock out. With the other, I grip Aurora’s throat.

“Bastard.”

“These”—I force her to look at the vanity—“are toothbrushes. In this tube, you’ll find what we call toothpaste. Your hairbrush is on the other side.” I tilt her head there. “I used it on your hair yesterday. Twice.”

“You’re not humiliating me. You can’t.” Wiggling, fighting me, it gets her nowhere. “Leave me alone. I can brush my teeth by myself.”

“Whatever *they* taught you, you’re going to unlearn.” Her clenched ass is no obstacle to me. I pull her hips back, the flimsy fabric of her nightgown

bunched beneath my thumb. My knee settles between her thighs. “You’re my wife now. Even brushing your teeth will be done on my terms. Brat.”

My teeth find her shoulder. They open over the purple mark I left on her.

Our eyes lock in the mirror.

Hers are terrified.

Mine are territorial.

This possessiveness that’s ever-present when I’m near Aurora is becoming a problem.

“Please.” Too late. Her body works against her. Melting into me. I put the toothbrush in her hand. Rock my hips into her, sliding myself between her wet inner thighs. “Please, Everett.”

“Are you going to talk back next time?” With the toothbrush in her hand, I adjust my cock. Line myself up to her pussy. Push in an inch.

She’s swollen from last night. From coming all over my cock while I pounded mercilessly into her.

Soaked.

It’s hard not to curse at her tightness. A challenge not to stuff her full of me with one push.

She’s bracing for pain, but she’s not scared of it anymore. The dirty little princess gets off on this—on me. The harsher I am, the filthier I talk, the more it turns her on.

Which means I’ll have to go harder.

Both of us need it, the reminder of why we’re here.

“Stop it.” She steps on my bare feet. Laughable, this technique she’s adopted. Thinking that she could do any real damage to a man twice her size. Fucking admirable too. “You aren’t this person. Can’t be. This is insane.”

“I’m your husband. I own you.” One shove, and I’m inside her cunt, tearing a groan out of both of us. “I can be whatever I want to be.”

My muscles flex, and my lungs are hot with the need for her. I might be bigger, might be the one caging her in, but it’s Aurora who possesses me.

Her pussy is gripping me. Her scent and that of her shampoo make me heady. Jesus fuck.

I’ll never admit it to her, ever, how there’s no other place I’d rather be.

My fuckable wife isn’t the only one who’s desperate for this. Being inside Aurora doesn’t feel like punishing her at all.

I ache for this.

More than ache.

Our eyes clash in the mirror.

She and I are reeling. Drowning in desire.

“Do you hear me?” Precum drips from my cock, mixing with her arousal.

I change an angle, going deeper without fucking her. Not yet.

Don’t want to miss out on this. The terror on her face, I’m addicted to it. “I won’t change. Better get that out of your head.”

“I won’t.” Her squirming is a mistake on her part.

“Yes, you will.” My cock pulses inside of her, and she gasps. “This is me, better accept it. I’d tell you to stop fighting me but…fuck. Every time you do it, it gets me really hard.”

“Just don’t make me come.” She’s white-knuckled. Gripping the vanity and her toothbrush like it’s her last anchor to her sanity. “Please.”

“You’re wasting your breath.”

And I feed on her fear.

My left hand covers hers, and I guide her to the toothpaste.

“I said I’d brush my teeth. Alone.” Her thighs clench, and the pressure on my cock sets my body on fire. “I promise. I’ll be good.”

“You’re being good already. So fucking tight around me. Squeezing me.” I open the cap on the toothpaste, squirting blue paste on her toothbrush. “Milking me.”

Some of the paste gets on the sink.

As if I give a damn.

Her. That’s all I see. I’m hard, and for the first time in a long time, it isn’t revenge consuming me.

It’s Aurora.

The infuriating notion makes me snap. I toss the toothpaste. Force the toothbrush into Aurora’s mouth.

“Then?” Aurora’s chin dimples. Her lips quiver around the toothbrush. “Why—”

“Quiet.” Holding her wrist, I start scrubbing her teeth.

Infuriating little thing mumbles through it. “Why are you punishing me?”

“These questions.” *Your family*, I want to say, but refrain. “This attitude. The mouth on you. That’s why.”

By degrading her, I turn into something worse than I already am. I transform into the monster Aurora keeps calling me.

“Hate.” Foam covers her perfect, plump lips. The lines between her eyebrows deepen. “You.”

Her miserable stare. Her ass tilted up, an offering.

There’s only so much I can take. Only so much need I can suppress.

Three.

The outline of her nipples.

Two.

Her pussy squeezing and soaking me despite the humiliation.

The feel of her. My God, the *feel* of her.

One.

I lose it.

I move my hand to her hip, never letting go of the toothbrush, and rail Aurora. Hard.

Every thrust is a retribution. For turning me into this man. For taking up space between my ribs.

All this *want*. All this *need*. I rut faster, harder into her. I give her every ounce of my resentment by dragging my cock along her tight walls, then slamming back into her tightness.

Claiming her is no longer a notion. A concept. A revenge.

It’s the blood running through my veins.

My wife belongs to me. And I’m taking what’s mine.

“Stop being a brat.” My words are more like grunts. My teeth graze the shell of her ear. “Brush your teeth like you told me you could, or your punishment will be devastating.”

Her whimper is exquisite. She’s trying hard, shaking as she runs the brush over her teeth and moans.

This woman wrecks me, and I crave more.

“That’s a good little slut,” I praise and degrade her, slowing the pace of my thrusts.

Going impossibly deeper. Stretching her for me.

Her hair flails every time I rock my hips into her. Her tits bounce, tempting me to abuse them. Bite them.

Later. We have our whole lives ahead of us.

Her nightgown is a problem, as it hides her from me. I have to see her. Have to own all of her.

The neckline crumples in my big hand.

One, two, and—there.

Torn, right down the middle.

“Oh God.” The words are garbled while she continues to brush her teeth. “Oh. Oh.”

Fuck her toothbrush.

The damn thing goes flying to the other side of the room. I grab Aurora’s hair, bending her until she’s level with the faucet.

She coughs when I turn the lever. Water begins to run.

“Rinse.” I let go of her hair, tucking it behind her shoulder.

I’m being selfish, refusing to miss out on one single tear.

Aurora doesn’t disappoint me. Fuck, she’s being so good. My enemy. Letting me fuck her.

Letting me look at her.

The villain in her story.

She tries her best to appease me. Lips parted, tongue out, she’s catching the water in her mouth.

Her surrender gets under my skin.

How can something as beautiful, as hot and tempting as her, be a part of something evil like the Clarkes?

Shaking it off, I place her hairbrush in her hand. “There”—*thrust*—“you”—*slam*—“go.”

“Stop.” The nails of her free hand claw at my forearm. Her pussy clenches, soaking me down to my balls.

“Stop.” Aurora’s thighs tremble, the sign of an upcoming orgasm. “Please.”

“Your hair.” Both of my hands are back on her hips, my cock slamming into her one relentless thrust after the other. “Brush it. You’re not”—I pull her ass higher, burying myself so deep she screams in pain—“coming down to breakfast looking like that.”

There’s nothing wrong with her hair. Even bedridden, even sticking to her face, it’s beautiful.

Being corrupted suits her.

But lying to her is part of my revenge. Unsettling her further while my cock rams into her cunt is precious. Her skin burns with humiliation.

“I won’t come, Everett.” The things her small gasps and sass do to me are infuriating. My teeth gnash. “Fuck me. Demean me. Hurt me. I won’t

come.”

I pummel mercilessly into her, a suitable punishment for existing.

“Look at me,” I snap. “Look at me while I fuck you. While I ruin you.”

My cold eyes and clenched jaw are what get her attention. Her obedience.

Whimpering and moaning, she obeys. She uses the hairbrush, struggling to run it through her hair.

Every flinch, every gasp, I devour it.

“Come.” I slide a hand to her front, spreading her pussy lips. Rubbing.

“I won’t.”

“We’ll see about that.”

When I slow down, it isn’t so she’ll have a reprieve. I push my middle finger inside her, between my cock and her walls.

Her tightness is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. This rough, depraved sex is ungodly.

Too bad I’m not here for my pleasure.

“You were saying?” Once my finger is soaked, I pull it out. I circle her taut clit that throbs under my fingertip. “Hmm, wife? Repeat that for me.”

“No,” she says, though we both know what’s coming.

This orgasm is taking over her. She breaks for me, and the moment she does, my world comes to a halt.

Her reflection entrances me. Her shuddering body. The tears that roll down her cheeks.

Those parted lips and the sound of her moans.

I breathe it in. Go slower even.

I’m savoring her for all the wrong reasons.

My hatred simmers in the shadows of my mind.

The pull to her is the only thing that exists.

“Fuck.” Her brush clatters to the floor, both hands braced on the vanity. “Fuck you.”

A different kind of need surges through me, and I hate myself for it. For giving in to her. To this. To desire that makes me forget about everything else.

“My name.” I tangle my wet hand in her hair, yanking her head back, her throat bared to me. I bite down, kiss, suck, marking her. I need to hear her say it so bad it hurts. “Say it when you come. Say my name. Mine.”

“No.” Her tears soak my cheek.

On the verge of insanity, I lick the salty water from her jawline, glowering at her through our reflection.

“Say. It.”

“Everett,” she breaks again. Her body jerks with my thrusts. With the aftershocks of her orgasm. “Everett.”

“That’s a good girl.” I barely get the praise out when I come, spilling myself inside her, pulling her up so she’s flush against me.

“Good fucking girl.” When I’m done, I twist her face to me, holding her still. Crushing my mouth to hers.

Filthy. Wrong.

Un-fucking-stoppable.

One kiss is all I allow myself to have.

“Your toiletries are in the drawers.” I pull out, leaving her trembling. In complete silence, I unlock her collar, removing it. “Take a shower. You’ll find your outfit for today on the closet island.”

“Everett.” My name is a pained cry as I push my seed into her using two bruising fingers.

I’m doing this, ruining her. Breeding her against her will.

“You’re better than this,” she pleads. “Whatever my dad did to you, you’re better than this. Better than him.”

Her words give me pause.

Of course. She must’ve pieced it together after last night, after our video call. Clever Aurora, thinking she’s cracked me open. But she hasn’t. She won’t. My hate runs deeper, older, darker.

And none of it belongs to her. My secrets, my revenge, they’re mine.

“You don’t know the first thing about me.” There isn’t an ounce of mercy in me when I wind her hair in my fist. “Do as you’re told, wife. Shower. Wear one of the new butt plugs for me. Rylee will be here in twenty minutes to put the collar back. Then you get fucking dressed and meet me in the dining area for breakfast. And Aurora?”

“What?” She rolls her lips in, as if wanting to talk back and thinking better of it.

I tuck myself in, staring her down. “You better not make me wait.”

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14

EVERETT

Once Rylee confirmed she'd helped with Aurora's collar, she and the rest of the staff retreated to their quarters for the rest of the day.

Leaving me alone on the main floor, waiting for her.

She won't have trouble finding me here.

This is the largest open space in the house. Part dining room, part living area.

When I moved in, I tore down the wall separating the two rooms myself.

It made sense, design-wise. The house is dark. The more open the space, the less suffocating it feels.

But I didn't give a shit about architecture when I swung that sledgehammer.

I wasn't remodeling. I was breaking things.

Destruction—I craved it.

Had fantasized about it for years. Blow after blow, I shattered plaster. Splintered wood.

Satisfaction surged through me, though it was brief, shallow. I was nowhere near calm in the aftermath.

Nothing had ever appeased me for over two decades.

Until now that I have Aurora. That my revenge began to take shape.

I tap my fingers against the glass and metal dining table as I wait.

My gaze sweeps across the room. Over the thick, gray rug beneath the black leather sofas, the matching coffee table.

What would Aurora think of all this? What does she make of me?

I don’t care.

I shouldn’t.

She isn’t here to think. Or wonder.

She’s here to pay for what was done to my family.

The fact that Aurora didn’t take an active part in ruining my family is inconsequential.

The fact that I enjoy fucking my new wife will not save her from me.

I smooth down my black T-shirt, adjusting the ache straining against my jeans. The shower I took in the guestroom did nothing to ease me. I walked out on her hard, and I’m still hard now. Painfully so.

Dammit. I can’t afford to lose control. She’ll be here any minute, and if she spots this weakness, she’ll try to manipulate me.

Breathe.

Inhaling deeply, I let air filter into my lungs. I place both hands flat on the table. The cool glass grounds me. Anchors me.

This is what power looks like.

Restraint. Patience.

Two things Aurora is severely lacking.

I’ve never claimed to be a perfect man myself. But the more time I spend with her, the more flawed I feel. Every crack in my resolve is proof of it. She makes me doubt. She makes me second-guess. And that’s what I hate most.

Deep. Fucking. Breath.

A few more of those and I’ll be back in my body. Back in control.

Fuck it, I *am* in control.

I’m also alone.

Aurora should be here by now.

Breakfast has been sitting here for a while. Pancakes. Toast. Eggs, cheese, vegetables. A few slices of pie within reach.

The coffee must’ve gone cold.

I should see her small figure crossing the room, sunlight spilling on her through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

I should be mad. I’m not.

Waiting for her in the silence stirs memories I wasn’t expecting.

Good ones.

A sad smile pulls at my lips.

We used to have family nights, just the four of us. Pajamas, popcorn, stupid board games. It didn’t matter what we did. What mattered was that we showed up, even if it wasn’t all four of us at once. Being together, that was what counted.

Mom would pretend not to be competitive. Dad would fake confusion over the rules. Lotus always had some project or surprise to share.

Something to prove she belonged. It wasn’t necessary, ever.

Now they’re all gone.

I’d give anything just to have one of those nights back.

One more laugh.

One more moment.

I sigh, running my hand through my hair when Aurora’s light footsteps reach my ears.

She’s treading down the stairs.

Memories tucked away, I lean forward, forearms perched on the table. Wait for her to come closer. Listen to her padding over the hardwood floors.

She appears in the wide archway a moment later.

Goddamn her. The mere sight of her is a punch to the gut.

She’s gorgeous in her black summer dress, with her brown hair flowing over her shoulders. With her large blue eyes that have doubt dancing in them.

She holds still beneath the archway, her hands clasped in front of her.

Expecting my orders.

Half of me hates that the brat side of her is nowhere to be found. That I fucked it out of her this morning.

The other half… Motherfucker.

I’m not just hard, I’m fucking throbbing.

I’m drinking up her submission. Devouring her fear.

Her collar. Her posture. Her silent plea not to come again.

Please.

I. Want. Her.

“Hey,” Aurora breathes out, her voice echoing her fear.

This heat in my chest, the straining in my jeans, they go against everything I believe in.

They’ll ruin everything I’ve worked so hard to achieve.

I can’t have it.

My fist clenches on the table.

My free hand snatches the remote from my lap.

Zap.

“Ow.” Her hand flies to her collar, her legs shaking. “What was that for?”

“Hands and knees.” I place the remote on the table next to my coffee.

A silent threat. A reminder of what I’d do if she questions me again.

With round eyes and careful movements, she lowers to all fours.

“Crawl to me.” I wish I could mock her. I wish I’d sounded derisive. I’ll compensate for my failure in other ways. “Keep your eyes on the floor.”

Aurora’s cheeks flush red.

I meant to debase her. What’s really happening is, I’m giving myself time to recover. To pull myself together before I do something worse. Like falling for her.

Without her gaze on me, breathing is somewhat possible.

Next is taming the urge to thread my fingers through her silky hair, which is dragging across the floor.

Her cleavage. The sway of her ass in that dress. I keep telling myself she’s my enemy, nothing more—but fuck, convincing myself is getting impossible.

“Is anyone else here?” she asks once her hands are mere inches from my feet.

“Would that make you wet, wife?” As if she’s my pet, I pat the top of her head. I resent how soft her hair is. I’ve got to get my sick desires under control. “To have an audience? Princess not feeling dirty enough?”

“No, I—” A shaky breath. “Please. I feel dirty enough. I don’t want any more of that.”

That *please* whispered from her mouth. My God.

“Since you beg so fucking pretty, I’ll have mercy on you. Just this once.” I doubt she believes that. Don’t give a fuck. “No one will be here to watch you being debased.”

“Thank—”

“I’m not that merciful.” I slide my hand down and grab a fistful of her hair. Tug on it until she’s looking at me. “You’ve kept me waiting.”

“I’m sorry,” she grinds out, her voice telling me she isn’t sorry in the slightest.

While crawling over here, her defiance snuck in. She’s pissed to have someone, anyone, demeaning her the way I do.

“I couldn’t get dressed as fast as I wanted,” she mutters through clenched teeth. “And that butt plug… I’m sore. That’s why it took me so damn long.”

Thinking about her fighting her butt plug. About her sore cunt. Her *pain*.

I’m possessed.

“How am I supposed to believe you?” Hiding my satisfaction, I release her hair, place a finger beneath her chin, and tip her face up. “You could’ve been up there, doing nothing. Avoiding me.”

“Because I’m not lying.”

The flicker of resistance in her eyes makes me lean in, searching for a lie. I test her with a hard glare until her cheeks flush and her chin trembles. Yeah, she’s being honest. But in this house, the truth won’t set her free.

“Everett, I’m telling the truth,” she insists, saying what I already know.

“Prove it.” It takes everything in me to feign boredom. I hate her. I crave her. My entire body vibrates around her. “Let me see you.”

She opens her mouth to talk back. Snaps it shut.

Aurora’s hair swishes as she shakes her head.

I raise an eyebrow. “No?”

“No. Oh, and,” she adds, “taking my pills took another minute.”

Cute. She thinks she’s taunting me by letting me know I don’t have a chance in hell of getting her pregnant.

Well, well. Technically, she’s not wrong.

She did take *a* pill.

A placebo.

She’ll find out about it when I decide it’s time. Hopefully, when it’s too late.

Until then, I play the part. Pretend to be furious. I clamp my mouth shut and wrap her hair in my fist again.

I bend toward my whimpering wife, my face hovering over hers. “Did I give you permission to take your pills?”

“No.”

“Did I ask whether you took your pills or not?” I shake her lightly.

“N-no.” Aurora’s hands come off the floor. Her balance is off with how carelessly I hold her.

She braces her hands on my knees, fingers flexing over my jeans.

The touch reaches through my clothes, lighting my skin on fire.

“What did I ask then?”

“To be on time. To let you see me.” She smells of mint; her hot breath tickles my lips. Leaning into her filthy mouth and biting her wounded lip would be the easiest thing. “And my ass. Oops, did I forget to tell you that I removed my nail polish too? And I shaved myself too.”

“You were waxed yesterday.” Without waiting for her answer, I lift one of her arms, looking at her armpit.

I’m treating her worse than I ever treated anyone, and she senses it.

Her lips twist, her hate wrapping around her like vines.

“I did it for me.” Aurora isn’t fighting me when I pull her closer by her hair. “I wanted to, so I did.”

I don’t justify her with an answer. I humiliate her by dipping my face into her armpit.

Her skin smells of the deodorant I bought her. Citrusy. Expensive.

She smells better.

What a fucking turn-on, being this close to her. Looking at her breath hitching. Her nipples strain against her dress, since a bra wasn’t a part of the outfit I left for her.

“Brat.” I breathe her in. “Let’s see how well you did.”

I dart my tongue out, lapping it over her armpit.

“Bastard.” She seethes, but her nails sink into my knee and her skin prickles. I really am doing a terrible job of torturing her. “Hate you. Hate. You.”

“You’re clean here.” Ignoring the ache at the base of my cock, I manhandle Aurora, dragging her off me and spinning her until her ass is right in front of me. “You said you were sore. Must be swollen. I want to see for myself.”

“I lied. I lied.” Her murmurs are followed by quivering legs. She whimpers the moment I bunch her dress up her back. “I swear. I lied. I’m not swollen, at all. I’m sorry.”

One tug and her black lace panties are ripped off her body. She didn’t lie. She is swollen and wet.

Chair out of the way, I drop on my knees behind her, groaning at her sweet scent.

I spread her legs before running two fingers over her wet inner thighs.

“You’re soaked.” Her pink pussy is begging to be eaten out. “Fucking dripping, Aurora.”

My mouth waters for a taste.

Patience.

“I’m not.” The tears in her voice are such a turn-on. “I peed.”

I have my hands on her hips, sinking my teeth into one of her supple ass cheeks. When her screams turn to gasps, I lower my head, licking the wet trail of her arousal on one thigh, then the other.

“Liar.”

“Stop,” she moans. “Stop.”

“Doesn’t”—*lick*—“taste like pee to me.”

“I-I will pee on you.” She fidgets, clenching her thighs. Trying and failing to control the situation. “I swear.”

“Excuse me if I have a hard time believing a shoplifter.”

I could get lost in her hips for days. Round and firm. Soft and inviting. I’m fucking taking them. Tilting them up. Spanking her to get her to calm down.

Blowing air on her naked sex.

“Fuck you.”

“Filthy fucking prisoner.” My fingers bruise her as I pull her to me.

The kiss I press to her pussy is a warning. The calm before the storm.

Before I find her clit.

My lips wrap around it, my teeth grazing the sensitive flesh, sucking and biting.

“No,” she howls, yet her muscles flex, her body unsure whether to flee or give in to this. “Stop. Stop.”

“As you wish.” Swiftly, I release her, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

“What?” Her head whips back to glower at me as I move to return to my chair. “Everett?”

The round O shape of her lips is a goddamn invitation. A reminder of last night, when she wrapped them around my cock.

Next time I slide between them, I won’t be there to comfort her. I’ll be fucking her pretty mouth.

My mouth.

I crook my finger in a *come-here* gesture.

Aurora turns around. Her submission is a plea for me to be a decent man and finish what I started.

Of course I'll make her come, but I'm not decent. I'm just as filthy, as depraved as my wife.

That's why I'm making her wait.

"Breakfast." I tear a piece of whatever food is closest to me. A pancake? Fine. Whatever. "Right now." I tap my knee for her to come closer.

"Everett." That pleading voice will be my undoing. It's as dangerous as the sight of her crawling to me. "Please. I need to—"

"Open up, and I might let you." Dangling the syrup-soaked pancake slice near her mouth, I hold Aurora's chin.

Her eyes squint briefly before she decides this fight isn't one she'll win. She lets me dip the pancake between her teeth. A moan escapes her as soon as it lands on her tongue, eyelashes fluttering.

My nostrils flare. My ribs are about to crack.

Feeding her—my collared, kneeling wife—shouldn't be sexual. Shouldn't pull at my heartstrings.

All logic fails me the moment she closes her lips around my fingers, sucking the syrup off them.

Unable to help myself, I dart my tongue out, swiping it over what's left of her arousal on my lips.

I want to fuck her mouth with my cock. Want to do it with the pancake still there.

Instead, I pull out my fingers.

As starved for food as she is for sex, Aurora chews and swallows the pancake within seconds.

My pulse roars in my ears. My heart hammers in my chest.

She won't get to see that part of me. The part that she holds in the palm of her hand.

Never.

"Suck them fucking clean." Shoving my sticky fingers into her mouth gets me more of her humiliation. More of her wide eyes. Choked cough.

My inner battle turns into a bloodshed the moment Aurora licks me, then gulps the syrup.

Her throat works. Her tongue slides over my fingers again. Between them.

This wasn't supposed to happen. This attraction. Being pleased with her.

Tears streak down her cheeks the deeper I push my fingers in her, mercilessly.

“Enough.” My chair scrapes the floor.

The distance from Aurora clears my head.

By some.

“Will you please…” she starts again, voice cracking. “Please…”

Her misery is a thing of beauty, even when she enjoys the pain.

She could’ve waited to be excused. Could’ve gone to the bathroom and gotten herself off there.

Yet here she is, choosing this. Choosing to beg me to make her come.

Me, the man with the power to zap her.

Surprisingly, I’m not disappointed.

“Please what?”

I won’t end this session until I’ve wrung every last drop out of it. Even if it’s torture, stopping myself from fucking her throat.

The coffee’s within reach. I grab it, down half in one swallow and hold it in my mouth.

“I need…” She squirms, fingers clawing the floor. Hips grinding on nothing. “I need…”

I spread my legs, gesturing for her to come to me by crawling.

My new bride trembles as she makes her way over to where I’m seated. Her blue eyes are pools of submission.

The things I’d do to her… They’d be humiliating and painful. They’d turn her into a shell of a person.

Aurora deserves every single one of them.

Except—*Fuck*.

I’m not just turned on. I’m cracked wide open. For one dangerous moment, I want her without the buffer of hate. Guilt slams into me, but I shove it down.

I’m not supposed to like this.

But I do.

So I turn off the revenge. For the next few minutes, there’s no past, no vendetta.

There’s only her. The pleasure of her.

Aurora’s bottom lip feels soft and wet beneath my thumb. She resists me, just a little, as I pry her lips open wider.

When she relents, I let my fingertip brush over her teeth, the tip of her tongue.

Our gazes burn one another's, and I don't think. I lean in to tower over her, blocking out everything else. I yank on her silky hair, making sure she doesn't move.

She's my possession. My fuck doll to manhandle however I want.

Except it doesn't look like I'm forcing her to do anything. With fire lighting her eyes, she darts her tongue out. She's giving me permission to spit into her mouth.

As if I needed her consent to release the cool coffee into her. I hold her in place, watching the brown liquid spill between her lips. Filling her pretty mouth.

My cock throbs at how well she takes it.

After she gulps it down, I order her, "Lick my lips clean."

"Will you help me come then?" she says, breathing hard.

"Where's that pretty *please* from before?" I cock my head to the side, my voice strained. "Are you back to being a brat? Mistaking us for equals?"

"Fine."

She can hate me all she wants. She obeys me anyway.

Aurora inches forward. Tilts her head up as high as I let her.

Then—

God. Fuck. Her tongue flattens on my lips, licking them slowly, seductively.

The taste of coffee is replaced with the taste of Aurora as she wipes me clean.

To top it off, she dries me by blowing a soft breath over my wet mouth.

"Good girl," I grit out. She moans at the praise, a pained sound. A pleading sound. "Good fucking girl."

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15

AURORA

Convincing myself that this thing I have with Everett is purely physical, that's impossible. Our relationship is so much more than that.

Needing him, the man, is the ache in my bones. The pressure in my temples.

My shivering body calls out to him.

I'm yearning for him, all of him. His demeaning and obscene orders. His cock that's so hard in his jeans. The feral gazes he pins me with.

I'll die if he, and only he, won't make me come.

Can't he tell that I need him?

I thought he did. I thought he cared, in his own twisted way. Maybe I was imagining it, but I felt it all the same.

He touched me. He fed me.

And now he's frozen, letting me marinate in that *"Good fucking girl"* he said minutes ago.

"Please, Everett."

His silence brings tears to my eyes. They roll down my cheeks the longer he makes me wait.

I'm at my lowest ever. Nothing more than a stray at his feet. An animal that was shown what their warm, loving owner could be like, only to be kicked to the curb.

I stare into his eyes, wishing he'd say something.

Anything.

G*ood girl*, he called me. *Wife*.

I'm aching for more of his attention, more of his words.

His vile fingers and cock on and in me.

He's turned me into a woman I don't recognize.

He sees right through my loneliness and desperation for any kind of attention. He sees it, and he uses it against me.

I don't care.

"Please," I beg again.

"Here." He offers me a clean spoon. The veins on his forearm bulge. His tattoos are just as enticing, sending a thrill up my spine. "Take this."

"You're not going to feed me anymore?" The crack in my voice is pathetic. Somehow, that idea hurts worse than the thought of him leaving me unsatisfied.

I clear my throat. Swallow the shame. Look up at him and beg him to feed me with my eyes.

I'm done fighting it. For once in my miserable life, something I want is just within reach.

I won't back down. Not this time. Not even from him.

"No, Aurora. I'm not going to feed you. Now."

I shake in the sting, inhaling through my nose.

"You know what, I don't give a fuck about food." My eyes cut from the spoon to his harsh glare. "I wasn't that hungry anyway. You said you'd make me come. Do it."

"Brat." The pressure on my hair is gone, replaced by this agonizing grip on my chin. "Apologize."

My eyebrows shoot down. He's still withholding pleasure from me. He's being cruel.

He could do worse.

Everett could deny me an orgasm. He could keep repeating this nightmare for an eternity. He has the power to do that. He has all the power.

I have to change my strategy. Have to claim some of the power for myself. If he respects me, he might let me have what I need.

"You're the one who should be apologizing to me."

"Apologize." The second time he says it hits different. He's less angry. More desperate.

For me.

"Apologize for what? Hmm?"

The air crackles with tension as seconds stretch between us.

The longer he holds me in his punishing grip, the hotter I get.

My thighs are embarrassingly wet. My breasts are heavy. Skin tingly.

“For what?” I breathe out.

“For being a brat,” he quips.

Before I know it, the spoon is shoved into my hand. My free one remains firm on his knee, supporting my weight.

His wrathful glare wakes the butterflies in my stomach. Helplessness clogs my throat.

I’m losing my mind.

“What are you waiting for?” It’s infuriating, how his T-shirt stretches over taut muscles. How it highlights his sculpted abs as he leans back, arms crossed over his chest. “You wanted to get off. So do it. Get. Off.”

Sure, I was a virgin yesterday, but even I know this isn’t how sex works.

“The spoon. I’m going to put it down.” Heat floods my cheeks. I hate that he’s pulling things out of me I’ve never admitted to anyone. That he isn’t just ramming into me and getting it over with. “Then I’ll… I’ll climb on top of you.”

His impatient glower cuts me to the core. Grabbing the remote off the table, he zaps me once.

A moan tears from me. A sob follows close behind.

My head hangs low, there, between his thighs. If not for my hand on his knee, I would’ve collapsed to the floor.

“Hmm.” This *hmm* doesn’t sound pensive. This *hmm* is ominous.

A smart girl would’ve heeded it. She would’ve kept her head down, waited for his wrath to simmer.

But the knots in my belly turn me into a stupid, reckless woman.

I lift my gaze, meeting his dark one head-on.

In my periphery, I catch him rolling down his fly with one large, skillful hand. My cheeks heat as my gaze lowers. Everett is confident and painfully hot, cupping his hard cock over his black boxers.

Keeping himself covered feels less intimate than it does like a warning.

“Thank you for this.” His voice steals my attention away from the alluring sight.

“For what?”

“For this idea you’ve given me.” He shrugs. “You get off, I get off.”

“You’re too far for that,” I groan. “For us to have sex.”

“I’m right where I’m supposed to be.” The corner of his lips quirks up. A smirk has never looked this diabolical on anyone. This sensual. “Since you haven’t figured it out by now, here’s how it’s going to go. You’re going to fuck yourself with the spoon.”

“What?” He can’t be serious. I can’t be considering this either.

“While your mouth will be busy sucking my cock.”

“No. Not like this.” On impulse, I push myself off him.

His hand laces in my hair, keeping me right where I am.

Right where he wants me. “I wasn’t asking, wife.”

As I tremble in front of him, tears spring from my eyes. My shame pushes them out faster than before. Rivers of it.

Sucking him, really sucking, instead of just having him in my mouth.

It’s a turn-on.

The spoon in my pussy though. That’s—I can’t be into it. That’s vile. Unhinged.

This isn’t normal.

The fact that my thighs squeeze is equally insane.

“No.” I bare my teeth at him.

“No, what?” he challenges.

“You can’t force me.”

A cold expression settles over his face.

The fire. The hate. The lust.

Gone.

He’s closed himself off to me.

“Try me.”

I whimper. I did try him. He did end up forcing me. More than once.

And I didn’t hate it. I don’t hate it now. His threats. The power play. The attention and release he promises overpower the shame.

I’m taking it. If only to be able to think straight later.

If only to see how this feels.

Slowly, I lower the spoon to the hot space between my thighs. Everett is a predator, tracking my movements. His jaw is the sharpest it’s ever been.

His watchful gaze is settled on me while he takes his cock out of his boxers. This whole scene is intense. It’s too much.

Everett doesn’t care that I’m so overwhelmed I can hardly breathe. He grabs the base, then he runs his hand over his big, throbbing length.

“Come here.” He cups the back of my neck, a possessive grip he uses to draw me closer to him.

My mouth hovers over the tip of his cock. My body stills, fear lacing around my lungs. I don’t think I’m breathing.

“Be good for me.” There’s longing in his voice. He blinks, catching himself. He’s trying so hard to hate me. “Don’t make me punish you more than I have to.”

“You like punishing me.” Resisting him is a challenge, given how he grips me. “You sick fuck.”

“Put the spoon in your pussy.” At his deadly whisper, my mouth snaps shut. Insides shudder. Clit throbs. “And fucking suck me.”

The request isn’t really a request. Not when he impales my mouth on his cock, lifting his hips to shove himself down my throat.

He’s too thick. Too overwhelming. Too deep.

I gag, fighting for my next breath. Fighting to understand why being demeaned by him lights up every last one of my nerve endings.

Whatever the answer is, it won’t change the fact that I’m starved for him.

Obsessed with him. With the satisfied sounds he makes.

My stomach flutters.

My throat works to accommodate him.

The first taste of his arousal has my eyes rolling back. A hum of pleasure mixes with my coughs.

“There you go.” He’s getting impatient. His throat bobs, his thigh clenches beneath my hand. But he isn’t punishing me. There’s no hiding the pleasure that rolls off him. “Such a good girl for me. My brat of a wife on her fucking knees. Taking my cock like that. Jesus.”

I hate him. I need him.

I want to obey him.

Everett’s brainwashed me. He’s into this—putting the end of the spoon inside my soaking pussy.

“Good girl.”

He’s conditioning me to listen to him.

“Work that hand faster.”

He’s demanding that I submit.

I do.

I’m trembling and gasping; the silver spoon is cold in my hot pussy. So good though. It’s so awful and so good.

Clenching around the spoon, I drag it in and out of me like Everett has ordered me to.

It’s driving me insane, rubbing the handle along my walls. Everything’s ten times worse or better or hotter when I find *that* spot. That secret, dirty place where Everett stroked me yesterday.

“That’s it. I see you. You want it so bad, don’t you?” His hips grind into my mouth in a rhythm that shouldn’t be right.

I shouldn’t get so close to an orgasm. I shouldn’t mimic his pace with the spoon.

Desire shoves my shame down where I can’t feel it. I can only feel him.

“Fuck. Fuck, Aurora.” His grip on my hair is more demanding, more possessive. “Make that pretty cunt come. Need this. Need you screaming on my cock.”

Refusing him is impossible. My body has been pushed to its limit. I’m standing at the peak of a mountain, Everett behind me. His capable hands are on my back.

His cock in my mouth and his filthy words throw me off the metaphorical cliff.

I cry in shame. I cry from how exquisite it is.

I cry because this vicious man isn’t wrong.

He sees me. He knows how to hurt me.

“Good girl.” Hot cum spurts into my mouth. Down my throat. “So good.”

There’s so much of it, and I’m taking it all for myself. I’ve earned it, to own a piece of this monster.

“That’s it. Swallow. Yes.” His eyes are as dark as his tone. “That’s a good slut. My good slut. God, I hate you.”

He repeats my name as my tears wet his thighs. As I moan on his cock. I can’t stop. I can’t as one aftershock after another threatens to drive me into oblivion.

“Let go.” He holds my head down, his thumb stroking my nape. “Let go. It’s okay. I’m here.”

At first, I’m confused. Let go of what? I already came.

Then it hits me.

Black dots dance at the edge of my vision. The lightness. The loss of control over my limbs.

“It’s okay.” He pulls out of my mouth.

His arms wrap around me. Strong and capable, raising me to his lap as if I weigh nothing.

My fingers are powerless, releasing the hold on the spoon.

It clatters as it falls on the floor.

“Everett.”

“Let go,” he demands, nestling me closer to him. “I’ve got you.”

I do, but not before this one thought flashes in my head.

A neon sign.

The monster has me.

And while I might be able to let go, he won’t.

Not ever.

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16

AURORA

I've been in Everett's bed for hours.

I woke up here after passing out at breakfast earlier.

When I came to, my first instinct was to run to the door and test the handle. Years of being locked up by my parents has conditioned me to do so.

The door wasn't locked. I was free to leave the room.

I didn't want to. Couldn't bear the thought of meeting Everett head-on just yet, as much as I itched to be near him.

And while I didn't see him, I felt him.

All day, I've been surrounded by him, by the memories, by the objects he uses to stake his claim. I haven't been alone, not really.

Especially not when he's the one who's brought me my meals, both lunch and dinner. I know it's him. Whoever knocks never lingers, never says a word. Rylee or Elena would've greeted me, offered something. Anything.

Everett, though…

I sigh. Why won't he come to our room?

Hours of turning him over in my mind, and I still can't make sense of it. Why the man so intent on punishing me leaves my door unlocked. Why he bothers bringing me food but then leaves. Why he isn't here, tormenting me the way he swore he would.

It doesn't feel like mercy. I hate it. I hate his absence.

Darkness surrounds me and fuck, I’m tired, disappointed, and lonelier than I’ve ever been, curled beneath the covers in one of his shirts.

Where is he?

I sit up, about to go to him, before my sadness sinks deeper. My chin dips, shoulders slumping. I scold myself for remembering how he saved me from my parents.

But no matter how many times I tell myself that I’m an idiot, the longing for him doesn’t go away.

Footfalls in the hall snap me out of it.

The door pushes open.

My heart swoops. Everett’s here, standing in the doorway, looking every bit as dark and intense as he was that morning.

I reach for the lamp and switch it on, and it bathes the room in a warm light.

Words escape me.

Needing his kindness shouldn’t make me feel like I’m boiling from the inside.

He can never know that I’ve missed him. Ever.

“You’re up,” he says almost to himself. There’s longing in it. Regret.

Or I’m imagining things.

Impatience gets the better of me, which is why, out of everything I could’ve started with—like *I missed you* or *Please don’t leave me again*—what slips out is a clipped, “Where have you been?”

In that infuriating silence of his, he comes to the bed and unfastens my collar. His hands are warm and steady. The weight of his gaze drags across my skin until my chest feels tight.

I hold my breath as he presses me onto my stomach, the shift rough but careful. The plug is gone a second later, discarded in the bathroom’s wastebasket, but the phantom ache of it lingers.

When he returns, naked now, my throat works, but nothing comes out beyond a strangled moan. I can’t help it, he’s so beautiful.

He says nothing, but there’s no hesitation in him. His hands claim me, sliding over my body as he peels his shirt off my body.

Then I let him guide me by the small of my back toward the bathroom where the steam is waiting. His grip is unrelenting, and I’m furious at myself for the shiver of relief that comes when he showers me.

Especially since he goes about it in such an impersonal manner. Efficiently. Quickly.

I'm just another vase lying around his house, waiting to be cleaned. Another decorative bowl to sweep the dust off.

Or so he'd like it to seem. His body speaks for him, and by the end of the shower, he's hard. I'm wet and wanting.

Neither of us says a word, not even when he ushers me to the closet.

The clean pajama pants do nothing to hide his erection and the way his cock jerks when Everett helps me into a long, black silk nightgown.

It's when we get under the covers that I lose my patience all over again.

"Where have you been?" I repeat, desperate to know what's so wrong with me that he hasn't been here to fuck me. To ruin me further.

Why I'd want any of it is beyond me. I just do.

"I've been working." He lies on his back, looking at me with his intense gray eyes. The fucked-up side of me craves his touch. The sensible side urges me to run away. "Come Monday, you'll have your own commitments too."

Commitments sound a lot like work.

I'll get to work.

Me. Holy fucking shit.

I was never allowed to dream of a job. Of any sort of independence or a human interaction that my parents didn't monitor.

"Really?" Excitement pushes past my exhaustion.

But, as always, suspicion is quick to follow.

Nothing good ever happens to me. "Wait. Why?"

"I'm not done with you."

At that, I frown.

"Your parents haven't seen you as broken as I would've liked," he says with a quiet finality, eyes unreadable. "Go to bed. We'll talk tomorrow."

He isn't asking. He's demanding.

That's my husband. And I'm his foolish, obedient wife who closes her eyes and falls asleep on command.

The next morning, I wake up alone.

Many feelings assault me all at once—disappointment, relief, craving.

I'm a mess.

Before I can sort through this clutter of emotions, my eyes latch onto a piece of paper on the empty side of the bed.

A note waits there, not Everett.

Disappointment burns my throat, then shame for being foolish and hoping he'd be there.

As upset as I am, I'm also curious. I pick it up, reading Everett's instructions in his elegant script.

There's a new butt plug in the vanity for you. You have food waiting in the kitchen. Eat or not, I don't care.

You're on your own from now on.

E.

"Asshole," I curse, though my chest tightens. I flatten my hand over my heart, where I ache the most, crumpling his note with the other.

Has this been his plan all along? To get me hooked on his sick games, then leave me?

I get up, throw away the offending piece of paper, and open the blinds. It strikes me that it isn't really morning. Seems closer to late afternoon.

"You know what?" No one answers, obviously. "I'm getting out of here because *I* want to leave the room. *Me*."

Despite my heavy heart, I pick myself up, brush my teeth, and leave the room.

The expensive fabric of my nightgown falls delicately over my naked body, swaying with me as I walk down the silent halls.

The main floor is as quiet and peaceful as the second one. The last of the day's warm light floods from the expansive windows, but there's no other sign that the outer world exists either.

The staff is gone too. Same as yesterday, there's no one in sight.

There's just me and Everett, wherever he is.

I don't search for my husband as I pad into the joint area of the living and dining room. I don't wish to catch him here, wearing his loungewear or jeans and drinking coffee in his kitchen.

I do hope for it.

I hope for him, in the way that warms my heart and tears it up at the same time.

Let go, I've got you.

My fingers meet cool marble as I swipe them over the pristine kitchen island. Fresh fruit has been placed in a black ceramic bowl at the center. A full breakfast waits for me on the dining table, but no Everett.

I'm not hungry though. Not for food.

I close my eyes, leaning against one of the chairs to keep from falling.

This… This is where he sat. Where he watched me as my body went limp.

You're no good to me dead, I think I heard him murmur as he carried me to bed. Warmth infused into his words. A touch of kindness.

It must've been a slip-up. Or my tired, stupid brain latched onto the idea of having a loving husband.

We shared a moment.

That moment was a lie. If it weren't, he would've spent yesterday with me. He wouldn't have been distant.

Footfalls from somewhere around the house reach my ears.

My face goes hot, then cold. My heart beats wildly as I listen for him.

As I wait for the inevitable.

Being zapped.

Nothing happens. No one's coming for me.

The prisoner in a beautiful dress with nothing underneath. With a collar around her neck. A butt plug inside her.

These damn rings I'm wearing.

My stomach dips, my soul crushed under the weight of this loneliness.

"No." Determined, I whisper into the empty room. "I'm done being alone. Done."

He married me. He fucked me. It's his fault I've grown attached.

He's the one to blame for how messed up my head is right now.

Like it or not, I'm his problem as much as he is mine.

And that is that. I'm going to find him.

"Everett?" My voice bounces off the high ceilings as I tread the halls.

He gives me nothing. I have no idea where he is or what he's doing.

This silence fuels my anger, quickening my steps. My need to tell Everett he can't just play these mind games and force me to feel things is strong.

I'm a human being. I've been tortured enough. Have been cast aside for twenty-two years.

I won't be ignored anymore, much less by a man who went through all the trouble of making me his wife.

He can be a mean, sexy monster. But I can't stand this—this feeling like I'm nowhere near being anyone's first or even second choice.

The sad thing is, I'm not even thinking about running away, not really.

Technically, I could try to make a break for it tomorrow, during my *commitment*.

It isn't what I want anymore. I want this, my fucked-up, twisted marriage, to work.

So I keep searching for him. Every room down the expansive hall is a possibility. I stick my head into an empty den. An empty TV room. Another room that's literally empty. There's nothing there.

No Everett either.

Maybe he'd respond to being taunted. That always seems to get his attention.

"Oh, husband?"

An obnoxious silence answers my obnoxious call.

The monster is either working, avoiding me, or both.

My teeth graze the wound on my lip.

"What's this?" I stumble upon a locked door. The handle won't budge.

My brow furrows. My curiosity piques. It's enough to assuage this loneliness inside me. For now.

I let my hands run over the carved dark wood, over the door that I assume protects Everett's secrets. That's what *locked* usually means. That someone's hiding something.

What's he got there?

No, of course I'm not curious about him. I'm definitely not trying to humanize him. There's no excusing what he's done to me. I think.

Enough thinking. Enough rationalizing.

I want to go into that room, and I will.

To get inside, I'll need paperclips or bobby pins. I've never broken into anywhere before, but with nothing but time, I head back to the den.

The desk drawers aren't locked, and one of them holds office supplies.

Two new paperclips are in my possession.

Adrenaline floods my veins as I rush back to the locked door.

The forbidden one.

This lock isn't as complicated as the one on the front door seems to be. A few maneuvers, and…

Click.

I'm inside.

In Everett's secret room.

The blinds are sealed shut. I can't see anything.

Searching the wall to my right, I find a light switch. As soon as my fingers flip it, a soft glow floods the room.

And my jaw drops to the floor.

Look at all these books. These bookshelves.

They line the walls, reaching as high as the ceiling. A wooden ladder leans against one of them.

“Holy…” I close the door behind me as gently as possible.

Before I saw what’s in here, I ached for Everett’s company. Either that, or learning about my captor and his many secrets.

Now that I’m in this room, my sad reality is pushed to the back of my mind.

This place, I need an hour, two, or a million in it.

I don’t want Everett to drag me out before I’ve had a chance to take in this mini-library.

In addition to books, two leather recliners are positioned in one corner. Another charcoal-gray loveseat is further inside the room by the fireplace.

My gaze bounces across the room. Over the numerous spines. Leather spines. Paperback spines.

I can hardly make out what each of them says; I’m so blown away.

Books weren’t allowed in our household. Probably because of my constant pleas to have them.

This must’ve been why this room was locked. Maybe this is how rich, sadistic assholes torture their victims, by withholding books, entertainment, everything that makes life bearable.

Resentment is an old, corrosive knife that’s been buried between my ribs for as long as I can remember.

Neither he nor my parents will ever stop me from reading ever again.

This house has books in it, and I will read them, goddammit.

With this new resolve, I take the first steps forward. After a closer look, I’m finally able to focus on the titles and subjects.

Everett has history books, law books, and biographies. There are more ahead of me.

More shelves. More books.

The further I go, I notice how sparkling everything is. Everything’s been kept in perfect condition.

Not for my benefit though. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have kept the room barricaded.

My shoulders slump, which is silly.

A glimmer of kindness might shine through Everett every once in a while, but that's all it is. A glimmer.

In the grand scheme of things, he wants to hurt me.

Yet here you are, in this room, after spending the afternoon looking for him, your captor.

Ugh. Whatever. I blink away the rising sadness. Go over to another shelf.

The titles over here make me smile. They sound like fiction books—there's no *war*, stock market, or a person's name on them.

I touch each and every spine. These are the first fiction books I've ever seen.

Oh, I'm delving into those first. I'll read all of them.

Right after I've completed my tour. The tour that Everett never planned on giving me.

What was I thinking, getting attached to him? Clearly, I wasn't.

I haven't been looking at it like I should.

His possessiveness during the wedding ceremony? That wasn't about protecting me. It was about getting back at my parents for whatever they did to him. They must have done something.

I can't imagine him wanting to marry a girl he hates and rubbing it in her father's face for no reason.

Maybe *she* was his fiancée and Everett wasn't the one who killed her.

Maybe it was Dad.

Briefly, I consider the idea before dismissing it altogether.

My parents know that getting locked up is one of the worst things that can ever happen to a person. They wouldn't have dared murdering anyone if it meant they'd end up in a cage.

I think.

They had to have hurt Everett in another way.

And now I'm a pawn in his revenge.

An unhinged laugh bubbles up inside me. Hating the sad, pathetic sound, I slap a hand over my mouth and walk deeper into the room.

Where another surprise awaits.

Old, worn-out books have been arranged in a square shape. They frame something.

Curious, I edge closer.

My eyes bulge out at what I find there.

A collage of family pictures has been bolted to the wall. Photos of young Everett, smiling next to three people I haven't met or seen before.

Two of them must be his parents. The similarities between them are uncanny.

They hug him tightly. Him and this young girl.

This girl, she has to be *the* girl, the mysterious *she*. She's beaming. She has such a beautiful smile.

Everything about her is beautiful. Her blue eyes. Her hair, so dark it's almost black.

In some of the photos, Everett's smiling back at her.

Genuinely smiling at the younger girl.

Jealousy tastes sour and acidic on my tongue.

No one's ever offered me a smile as bright and loving.

My parents are always either bored with me or mad at me.

My tutors, our staff, and my security detail always maintained a wall of separation between us.

The Royalty members don't give a damn about me.

This girl, she had that. Three people who laughed at something she said.

One of them was Everett. She had his love. His awe. His adoration. He doesn't seem to be *in* love with her. He just looks happy to be spending time together, with her and his parents.

This has to be the girl he mentioned before our wedding.

Is she his sister?

Is or was?

After another close inspection, I decide they aren't related. Can't be.

On the outside, she and his family are polar opposites.

Who is she?

"Aurora." Everett's sharp voice stops my heart. The air whooshes out of my lungs. "What the hell are you doing in here?"

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17

AURORA

"Nothing." After I force my lungs to work, the flippant response practically rolls off my tongue.

He thinks he can just march in here and scare me? After making me feel small and unimportant for more than a day?

No fucking way.

"Aurora."

"What are you doing here?" I turn to my new husband, my chin held high. "Aren't you busy avoiding me?"

Everett raises an eyebrow, leaning on the doorframe. A flicker of something unreadable crosses his face, but he doesn't speak.

Damn him. Damn him and his casual jeans and T-shirt; how well they fit him. Those veins cording his lean forearms, making my body buzz for him.

Straightening my spine, I look him dead in the eye.

His expression changes until he's fixing me with a glare.

This doesn't feel like he's taunting me back. The air in the room is so thick it makes me heady. Everett's eyes have never looked more terrifying. I can tell he's mad, even from a distance.

I bet he'd never looked at her like that. At the girl who, if I really think about it, reminds me of myself. Obviously, he knew her well.

A pang of something sharp and ugly twists in my chest. Not jealousy this time, but dread.

She's not that much younger than he is. And since he's forty-one…

Could she have been my…

My mom?

Bile rises in my throat.

No. My mother left me. I'm sure she had her reasons. I'm sure she loved me, but just couldn't keep me.

I'm sure of that.

That's how I know the girl in the photos isn't her.

Judging from these pictures, even if she was just a family friend of the Alders, she wasn't alone in the world.

They would've been there for her, had she needed help.

But she isn't here, and I was raised by the Clarkes, so she couldn't have been my mom.

It was a crazy idea.

This glowering man and this mansion are my reality.

He's a threat, and I'd do well to remember that.

"Aurora, so help me—"

"No. So help *me*."

It isn't a hardship to fake my bravery. I am kind of pissed at him for locking me out of here. For ignoring me.

I raise one finger, starting to count his offenses. "You've forced me to marry you."

"A merciful move." He pushes off the doorway and shuts the door behind him. "Offering you this place, instead of a prison cell." He gestures around the room, his house. "Seems fair to me."

"You collared me." Second finger up. Third for—"You zapped me, husband."

"You belong to me." He shrugs as if that explains everything. I'm boiling on the inside. "And you were being a brat."

"Then, you made me…" My voice cracks. Fuck. "You made me have sex with you. To do other things."

"We already had this talk. We're married. That's the end of the line for you." He shrugs, careless. "Funny though. I remember you begging me to make you come. Demanding me to tell you where I'd been because of how much you missed me. So spare me the bullshit, Aurora. You don't get to rewrite any of it."

Everett crosses the room toward me, going silent.

I’m just as quiet. I’m too embarrassed and way too turned on to say another word.

My thighs clench under his intense gaze. The pressure from the butt plug enhances my sad state of arousal.

“You came all over my cock.” He’s closer now. His presence takes up the entire room. “You took my cock down your throat and came while sucking me off too. Didn’t feel all that forced to me.”

I swallow hard and school my face into something neutral. For as long as I can manage, my unhinged husband won’t get the satisfaction of seeing what he’s doing to me.

The six feet between us are now three, two, one.

I shriek when his hand lashes around my throat. When he guides me away from the pictures.

“You.” He slams me against one of his bookshelves.

He bends so our faces are only a couple of inches apart.

I’d put my hands on top of his, try to push him away, but fuck. The possessiveness of his grip makes me needy.

“You’re upset because I fed you?” Everett’s eyes darken. He’s vibrating with anger that I don’t understand. Fighting with his attraction as if it offends him. “Because I gave you a warm bed to sleep in? Is it below your standards, princess? Answer me.”

“Oh, please.” My derisive huff is embarrassingly fake. My need seeps into my every word. “Your house is incredible.” Not to mention he isn’t locking me up in a basement. “We both know that.”

“So? Why are you giving me that attitude?” His voice is lower. Like he actually cares.

How dare he accuse me of anything when he’s taken so much from me?

I’m humiliated, needy, and a little desperate. I hate him.

I don’t.

“What attitude?” I’m being a brat, giving him exactly what he deserves.

Hoping he’d like it.

“I’m being generous.” A jerk of his hips, and I’m pinned between the bookshelf and his hard cock. “I don’t even punish you as much as I’d planned on. Yet here you are, complaining. Breaking into rooms I have locked for a reason.”

His minty breath is hot on my skin. His cock throbs against my stomach.

Shame and something darker war inside me. I squeeze my eyes shut. Can't take any more of this.

"Answer me."

When I open them, I nearly choke on my emotions.

Why does this man, this person who used to be happy at one point in his life, hate me?

What's so wrong with me that I'm this unlovable?

"I gave you a place to stay." He seethes. "Away from those fuckers you call parents."

"Fuck my parents."

His thumb strokes my collar. His other hand slips to his jeans.

The remote is out.

"Ouch!" Jesus fuck, he zapped me. Me *and* him, since his hand is still on my collar.

My eyes widen at the realization.

Despite the pain he must feel, Everett groans in pleasure.

Rocks his hips into me.

Forcing me to like it. I always do.

"Fuck them and fuck you." I lean in to bite his lip. I want him to bleed, to hurt. I want to taste him. But he's quicker, pulling away. "You gave me nothing. Just pain. Avoiding me, hiding these books from me? Promising me I'd commit to—a job, right? You've never told me what it was. We never actually talked about it. You lied, didn't you?"

"No."

"Stop lying." I'm struggling to talk, my desire and desperation for him locking my throat. "If nothing else, give me this. Just let me work."

As soon as the word *work* leaves my mouth, Everett's delicious grinding, his low groans, they're gone.

The fire in his expression isn't there. In its place, there's confusion.

A crease between his eyebrows. A myriad of questions on his face.

"That, and let me have this room." He hasn't refused me yet. I have to try, have to keep fighting him, as risky as it is. "Let me spend time here. Don't lock it up."

"Repeat that for me."

"I'm asking you to keep this room unlocked."

"Not that," he snaps, pressing tighter against me.

Now it's my turn to be confused. "I want to work?"

The creases on his forehead deepen.

He says nothing.

“I won’t pry. I won’t look at your pictures.” I slide my gaze to the collage on my side. Back to Everett. “I’m desperate to read, I’m lonely. You won’t talk to me. You hardly come near me. At the very least, you could let me read. Let me be here when you don’t…”

“When I don’t fuck you.”

“Yes.” My thighs clench without my permission. The shameful need for friction is eating me alive.

“Okay,” he says.

“You can’t do this to me.” I launch into an argument I’d always lose with my parents. They’d flip the lock, and that was that. “I have the right to get a job. For fuck’s sake, I’m a human being. I should be able to get out of this house. I should be allowed to read something other than math textbooks or—”

“Aurora.” My body is thrust harder into the bookshelves.

Everett presses his thumb beneath my chin, tilting my head up. Staring down at me.

The shift in him is so small, but it takes my breath away.

“I said okay.” He makes me gasp, the bastard. Makes my heart flutter. “You can work and spend time here, in this room. The photo collage is off-limits. The whole corner over there is. Other than that, fine. I won’t lock it up.”

The need to hug him is explosive. My arms itch to fold around him.

I go up and down on my tiptoes, readying myself to jump at him.

And stop myself. I’ve been around controlling assholes for the past twenty-two years. There’s a caveat somewhere. There’s always a caveat.

“So.” I flatten both hands on the books behind me, steeling my heart against more pain. “Do I still start tomorrow?”

“Yes, though it won’t be a real job.”

My eyebrows shoot down.

“I said a commitment. A commitment you’ll treat as a job,” he speaks up before I have a chance to slip in a word, before I argue. “A driver will take you there five days a week, six hours each day. You’ll do it voluntarily, this commitment that I’ve chosen for you. Just this one. It’s not up for discussion.”

“I’ll go. Every day, I swear.” Getting paid isn’t the issue. Meeting new people, socializing, evolving as a person…it’s the dream. “Where is it?”

“At the nearest hospital.” An evil glint shimmers in his eyes. He’s no longer compassionate or mad.

He’s pleased.

Strange.

I mean, this is good. Helping people. I can get behind that. Scratch that, I’m fucking pumped. What isn’t he telling me?

“Okay, cool.” My smile is hesitant. The caveat, I feel it coming. “I’ll volunteer there as…?”

His thumb strokes my jaw. A menacing touch. “A baby cuddler. Only with babies who were sent there for a few hours from orphan homes in the area.”

Two sentences. A bunch of words.

And my world comes crashing down on me.

Everett watches intently as my face crumples. My lips quiver. Hot tears prickle the corners of my eyes.

My empty stomach revolts, but I have nothing to throw up.

“No.” I grab the front of his T-shirt, twisting the fabric in my hands. “No. Please. You must know I was left at my parents’ doorstep. Alone. I needed someone”—a real someone, not my awful adoptive parents—“to hug me and love me. If you send me there, all I’ll think about is how helpless I was. How no one was there for me. How no one will ever be there for me. Please, Everett.”

The look of confusion on his face gives me hope. Then his jaw tics. His shoulders tense.

The wall is up. “My decision is final.”

“I’m begging you.” Tears roll down my cheeks, landing on his hand. “You don’t have to be this cruel. Use me. Fuck me. Do anything. Not this. I haven’t even stepped foot in that hospital, and it hurts everywhere.”

“Don’t care.”

“You…”

Yesterday’s breakfast flashes before my eyes. He got off on me being on all fours.

On me crawling.

With my last ounce of strength, I rip his hand off me, move to the side. Drop to my hands and knees.

Beneath his cruel gaze, I inch as close as possible to him.

My fingertips are at his feet. My sanity is too.

“Get.” He grabs me by the hair, pulling me off the floor. I’m backed up against the shelves. “Up.”

My hair is released. My chin is in his grip.

“Why? It would crush me, Everett.” I’m blabbering. I’m sobbing. “It would really, really hurt me. Can’t you see that? You can’t be that cruel. You aren’t that cruel.”

“I am who I am.”

The slice of humanity I saw in him? It isn’t there.

I’ve been fooling myself again.

“I won’t change.” His free hand wraps around my wrists. “I won’t fucking change, do you hear me?”

“I’m not asking you to change.” In a last-ditch effort to save my sanity, I pull our hands up to his face. His scruff is scratchy beneath my fingertips. “I’m begging you to be compassionate. Please.”

Briefly, he turns his lips to my hands. Presses them to my knuckles.

I hold my breath.

“My compassion, or any other soft emotion I had, was stolen from me.” He backs up, leaving me shocked, grasping the books behind me to hold myself up. “I have none left. You will go tomorrow. You will cuddle those babies. This isn’t a request. It’s an order.”

“But—” I start.

He’s already at the door, slamming it behind him.

Leaving me alone again, with my pussy wet, my heart broken, and my life the same as it’s always been.

Fucked.

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18

AURORA

"Aurora, it's time to wake up." Everett. He's here. Sitting on the bed beside me.

Behind closed eyelids, I can tell he opened the blinds. The sun is up.

It's Monday.

"No." I squeeze my eyes shut, as if it can save me from him.

Maybe it can. He didn't sound as mean as he was the last time he woke me up.

"You can't stay in bed." He might not be mean, but he is stern. Very. "You have to go to the hospital today."

What he's really saying is, *Time to face your trauma*. The babies who'll be an insight into what I must've looked like all those years ago.

With no one to hug them but a stranger.

Molly and Winston were the worst kind of strangers. My nannies too.

I doubt any of them held me or hugged me unless I was screaming or needed a diaper change.

I was trapped then. I'd been just as trapped years later.

And I'm trapped now.

I can't do it. I can't.

I won't.

"Leave me alone." I pull the blankets over my head, wishing to disappear.

Wishing to never think or talk about orphaned babies ever again.

Everett’s relentless fingers hook around the covers, pulling them down my naked body.

He didn’t fuck me last night after our blowout in the library. He just ordered me to strip, so I stripped. He ordered me to go to bed, so I did.

Naïve me thought that obeying my husband would win me points with him.

I thought wrong.

“Aurora,” he growls. “Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

My eyes crack open, still swollen from crying for hours.

His gray gaze is narrowed and harsh. His broad chest is on display, his abs flexing.

His cock is hard in his pajama pants.

He isn’t ready for work. He’s ready for battle.

Fighting me turns this sick bastard on.

Him and me. My nipples pull tight, I almost cry again in shame.

Now he knows more of my secrets.

“Pick a job,” I plead. His heated attention won’t distract me. “Any other job, and I’ll go. I’ll work any hours. You’ll never hear me complain. I promise.”

In the face of my shameless begging, Everett’s the picture of calm. And in my desperate, panicked state, I wonder if this is a good sign. If he might change his mind.

Until that happens, I stay exactly as I am. Docile and obedient as he removes my collar.

I bend my knees, spread my legs, and give him access to the butt plug he forgot or didn’t want to remove last night. I’m silent, clutching the sheets as he twists the plug and slides out of me.

I don’t tell him how wet I am for him. I don’t dare admit how strange it feels, to be one moment full, the next empty.

Besides, he’s already down there on his knees between my legs, seeing all of me anyway.

What I do tell him is the same desperate plea: “I’m not going, Everett.”

His stormy eyes are all the warning I get.

“The hard way it is.” In a split second, I’m ripped out of bed. Screaming in Everett’s arms as he carries me to the bathroom. “Remember, wife, that you’re the one who started this.”

“I’m not going!” I say again, screaming it so loud my lungs burn, “I’m not going!”

“Shut up.”

We’re inside his bathroom. Without breaking his stride, Everett turns on the hot water in the shower.

“You can’t make me!” The black hole in my chest turns me into this wild, unhinged animal. “You can’t do this to me. You can’t. Put me down.”

I’m fighting for my life, my sanity, as I tug his hair.

My husband doesn’t so much as blink.

He simply puts me down, right under the showerhead.

Water cascades down my face and his. Down our bodies, soaking through his pants.

My curiosity is a force as powerful as Everett, and goddamn him—I look down.

Both heat and awareness set me on fire. He’s harder than before, his dick pushing against the wet cloth.

I’m overwhelmed by this need. I almost forget that Everett is the enemy.

I have to clench my fists; otherwise, I’d do something really stupid like cup him. Pleasure him.

How I wish the circumstances were different for us.

When I finally ready myself to run off and lock myself up somewhere, I make a huge mistake. I stare back up at him.

Then I’m being hit with the full weight of his attention.

“You’re my wife.” His hand squeezes my throat. Locking me in place. “You’ll be where I tell you. Go where I tell you to go. You’ll spread your legs, warm my bed, and take a shower because I own you. Do we have an understanding?”

Water drips down his handsome face. Heavy drops on dark eyelids. On full lips.

And his voice, it’s hoarse. Rugged. Strained.

Because of me. It pains him to hurt me, I’m sure of it.

“You don’t have to do this.” I reach up, stroking his stubbled cheek. “Please. I’ll do anything. Don’t do this to me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” His gaze, something’s wrong with it, with Everett. “I have to go through with this. There’s no other way. None.”

The rest of my *please* and *let me stay here* go unnoticed. Everett, with one hand steadying me, rubs shampoo into my hair and lathers soap over

my body.

Kicking, screaming and appealing to his conscience all fail me. He has a job to do, and he won't stop until he's done.

I give up.

Eventually, I'm clean. I smell nice and refreshed, despite the horror I know is coming.

Everett won't let go of my throat even after he's done. He holds me in place while he shrugs out of his pants and boxers.

I get weak in the knees at his nearness, from watching his muscles rippling when he squirts soap over them.

His cock jerks, his biceps flex.

The heated glances he pins me with, it's melting me.

I'm sure he sees more of my shame. That I lust for him when I absolutely shouldn't.

Briefly, he stares at me as if I'm precious to him.

Then Everett shakes his head and moves on to washing the suds off his sculpted, infuriating body.

The moment we shared disappears as quickly as it came.

"I'm not going," I whisper again.

"Yes, you are." He turns off the water, guiding me out of the shower.

Everett's efficient, toweling me off first before he dries himself.

"Am not." I'm aware of how I sound. A child. A brat.

What else can I do? I'm at the end of my rope here.

"Do you hear me?" I call after him as he walks over to the closet.

I'd follow him. Except I might do something stupid like get on all fours again just to pleasure him and myself without any hidden agenda, which is terrible.

"Everett." So here I am. Raising my voice instead of joining him there.

"I heard you." He storms back in, a wrathful god in a dark, expensive suit.

A force of a man charging at me. His long gait throws me off balance, and I stumble back.

His hand around my arm is warm, catching me. Steadying me.

Trapping me.

He's everywhere, and yet I feel so hollow. So needy.

"I heard you…" Everett lowers his face, his lips at my ear, making me shiver. "Begging to be punished."

“No.” The world turns upside down. My body is being swept off the ground, and I’m on Everett’s shoulder, being carried out of the bathroom. “No, you bastard. Stop. Don’t take me out there naked.”

“Jesus Christ, you just don’t get it.” I think I hear compassion in his tone. A sliver of it.

He’s careful, sitting on the edge of the bed and manhandling me so that my stomach is over his lap.

“I get that you’re an asshole.”

He’s done being careful when his hand lands on my ass. No warm-up, no testing. An agonizing crack that sends humiliating heat directly to my pussy.

A scream rips out of me.

“If I fuck you”—*crack*, and I feel his cock poking my belly, throbbing —“we’ll be late.”

“Who said I wanted you to fuck me?”

“You did.”

“No, you did,” I lie. With one look, I begged him to have me. Me, all me.

One hand spreads my legs apart. Two fingers shove into my sex.

A humiliating moan tears through my throat before I lie again, “Not me. I didn’t.”

Crack. My pussy grows more sensitive, hotter by the second. I’m soaking my thighs, ruining his suit.

“Your body sure fucking did.” He’s right and he isn’t. I don’t want just his cock. I want all of him, can’t he tell, that sadist asshole? “I could see it in your eyes.”

Crack. Crack. Crack.

“You need my fat cock ripping that tight cunt in half.” He invades me using three thick fingers, curling them inside me. Rubbing the spot that makes my toes curl and hips grind without my permission. “You need it to calm the fuck down. It’s not the first time you’ve begged me for it, and it won’t be the last. I’ll always be here to take care of you, and you’ll live to regret it. I won’t be sweet, won’t be what you imagined your husband would be, but life isn’t fair. Life”—*crack*—“isn’t”—*crack*—“fair.”

His strokes turn to spankings that turn into strokes again. I’m a panting, writhing mess, entirely at his mercy.

“You can’t make me come.” So fucking floaty. “I won’t let you.”

The orgasm building inside me suggests otherwise. It thrives on the pain. On his vicious fingers rubbing my pussy.

I'm the center of Everett's attention, and God help me, it's the worst and best thing that's ever happened to me.

I'm feeding on it like a starving animal. Breathing it in like I'll die without him.

He's right.

I need this more than anything. I feel just how much I need it now that I'm losing the last of my restraint, coming on his hand.

I cry and moan, cursing him and begging him for more.

"That's it," Everett hisses, stroking my walls, waiting for me to settle. His cock throbs against me. "Stop fighting me, Aurora. You have a price to pay. You can't run from it. Your parents can't either."

"For what?" My tears fall at a steady pace onto the hardwood floor. *Drip, drip, drip*. "What did I do?"

"Be quiet." His command is more of a groan. "Dammit. Fuck."

Still high from the orgasm and stinging pain in my ass, it takes me a moment to realize why he's cursing.

While I've been on his lap, Everett's control has snapped.

I see it in his eyes as soon as he puts me on my knees before him. He's untethered, nostrils flaring. Chest rising and falling as he slides his hands over the sides of my neck.

"Damn you, Aurora."

The kiss he gives me is unlike any other. His lips are possessive, rough, and demanding. His tongue swipes along mine as if I'm the best thing he's ever tasted.

Everett catches each tear that rolls down my cheeks with his thumbs.

"Hold still." The way he rips himself from me is almost violent.

Releasing his belt, he pulls out his cock, a powerful show of his dominance.

I obey him, holding still without any ulterior motive. I'm not trying to get on his good side. Not thinking about the horrible day ahead.

I'm captivated by him. At this moment in time, I long to please him, though I absolutely shouldn't.

His elegance is mesmerizing, even when he's being crude. Even when he leans back, jerking off as he's watching me. Studying me.

Not for the first time, the full force of his attention slams into me. His hand makes obscene sounds as it pumps himself, his breaths rough and jagged.

Then, somewhere between one stroke and the next, pressure begins to form between my thighs. A sharp ache builds until a whine slips out of me.

I don't think I can stay anymore. I'm hot. I'm desperate.

Any second now, I'll rub my clit. Either that or I'll burst into flames.

"Oh, *fuck*." He squeezes himself hard. Rubbing faster. Leaking for—for me. I can't breathe. "You're trying, aren't you? Trying so hard not to be a brat for me."

I'm being demeaned yet somehow revered. Needed. He needs me, and I—

"Yes."

The word is barely out of my mouth, and he's there. Grabbing my hair, tugging me to him.

"Close your—*fuck*, *Aurora*—close your eyes."

A sick part of me rebels against this particular order. Against missing out on him fisting his cock.

At the last minute, when his legs close around my body, I slam my eyes shut.

Hot cum sprays all over my face, landing on my eyes, my cheeks, my lips.

Confusion and need turn me inside out. There's nothing else I can do but stay here. On my knees. Jaw slack and mind reeling.

"Filthy fucking princess."

I guess Everett's right, since I part my lips wider for him. I long for his depravity, for his cum-coated fingers to be pressed onto my tongue like he does now.

"Suck. That's it. Harder. Lick it. Good fucking princess. My broken wife."

He removes his fingers once I'm done. The sound of his zipper comes next, and after that, I'm up and off the ground.

Even with my eyes sticky and closed, I sense we're headed to the bathroom. He's going to take care of me.

The evil monster, the big, bad wolf.

Relief and a strange kind of tenderness roll over me.

And maybe over him too?

“Everett,” I plead. “Don’t punish me.”

“I already told you.” His voice is as cold, as impassive as his expression. “I will. It’s a done deal.”

At that, my hopes come crashing down. My chest caves in on itself.

“Now be good while I get you cleaned. You have a long day ahead of you.”

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AURORA

"Good girl."

Everett's eyes are cold. Impersonal. His knuckles on my cheek skim over the ghost of my dried tears.

"Stop it," I beg. "Let me stay here."

"Don't leave anything out when you tell me about your day later." The derisive command doesn't sting. It's fake.

I know better than to believe he still hates me.

Between the two of us, Everett might be the puppet master. He owns all the secrets. He owns this house behind him. He owns *me*.

But he's made one mistake, and that's keeping me close. Close enough to study him. Close enough to learn my husband's tells.

A part of him broke down for me earlier. He's been hard at work to reclaim his composure ever since he wiped his cum off my face.

With almost impersonal movements, he sanitized a new butt plug and put it in me.

He looked at me with a closed-off gaze as he locked the collar around my neck.

My pleas went unanswered while he forced emerald-green pants and a cream blouse onto my body. He didn't say a word when I kicked him with the new black heels he put on me.

This silence doesn't mean he hates me. Not at all.

Liking me scares him, because it means he'll have to stop hurting me.

He’s damaged. Flawed. Wounded beyond repair in the most beautiful, dark ways.

And despite how cruel he is to me, I don’t want to fix him. That cruelty is just his pain talking.

Something inside me tells me he’s been waiting for it for a long time. That he’s been planning this forever.

Everett even pursued a judgeship just to trap me. He didn’t say as much. Didn’t have to.

My husband is a calculated man. Never leaves anything to chance.

With time, he’ll tell me what broke him. We’ll grow into whatever this is. My only wish is to spare him some of that ache.

That, and to convince him not to send me to the ward.

His expression tells me that at least today, that won’t happen.

But I still hope. I try.

“Everett.” My anxiety clamps around my lungs and throat like a vise.

“What?”

“Hear me out, okay?”

“No.” His comment slices me.

Living under the Clarkes’ roof was awful enough. A constant reminder of the love I could never have from my biological parents. How am I supposed to survive this?

I’m doing my absolute best to keep a straight face. To breathe in the early morning air and relax.

I think I’m doing such a good job that Everett and I can almost pass as two normal people instead of enemies. Just two people standing in the driveway, outside their front door. Rings on our fingers. Our hair and outfits are impeccable.

Well, the two black Mercedes and drivers aren’t what I’d call ordinary, but yeah.

We don’t look like we’re at war either. Like I’m seconds from a meltdown.

Except I am. I really am.

“Please. I’d work at any other job. Would volunteer anywhere else.” He opens his mouth to deny me. I’m quicker. More desperate. “I’d stay out of your way completely. The brat you can’t stand. Wouldn’t it be nice?”

I regret the words the moment I say them, praying it won’t be the part that appeals to him—me, being gone.

The early morning breeze whips at my hair, threatening to ruin my carefully constructed chignon. Neither Everett nor I acknowledge it.

“What makes you think I wouldn’t want you here?” His eyebrows dip. His gaze flickers to my collar. My wedding band and engagement ring. Back to my face. “You’re mine. Here is exactly where I want you to be.”

A singular small butterfly beats its wings in my belly. The possessive statement could be a good sign.

Good *and* bad.

Here could mean *here* as his *wife*. Or his prisoner.

His to torment.

The butterfly flutters its wings in my belly, regardless.

“So keep me here.”

“I have work to do.” His scowl is an expression I’ll never forget. Tight jaw. Narrowed eyes. Lips pressed into a thin line. He comes to me in both dreams and nightmares. “And so do you. I thought I made it clear.”

“I can’t go there.” My scowl won’t ever match his, but the alternative is breaking down and crying. I won’t, not in front of him again. Not in front of the staff and drivers. “I thought *I* made it clear.”

“That fucking mouth,” he growls, snapping two fingers around my chin. Stealing my breath away when his lips crush onto mine.

His angry kiss must clean the red lipstick right off my lips.

“You’re going, and that’s final. Cormac”—my new bodyguard, apparently—“will report back to me. You’re free to give him hell. To defy him. Remember this though. You’ll be punished accordingly. I’ll take great pleasure in that.”

It shouldn’t be possible for my stomach to churn and my pussy to ache at the same time.

Apparently, it is.

Everett can make anything happen.

Breathless from the kiss and the mind-fuck he’s putting me through, I nod.

“Go.” But he doesn’t release my chin.

His lips are close. His hot breath mingles with mine. I want it. I don’t.

“Fuck.” Everett bites down on his bottom lip, turning his head to the side. “Go, Aurora. Just go.”

My heart is heavy, my panties are soaked. Nothing I can say or do will change his mind. Nothing will persuade him to have mercy on me.

Cormac gestures to the first Mercedes idling in the driveway. On the short walk to my car, I wonder about Everett. What scarred him so badly that he won't let himself open up for more than a fleeting moment.

Sooner or later, I'll figure him out.

Once I survive today. *If* I survive it.

I step through the door that Cormac holds open for me. The scent of a new car envelops me. It does nothing to slow my racing heart or stop my hands from shaking.

Everett's attention is on me the entire time.

I feel it first.

Then I see when I look outside the window.

The gaze he's pinning me with is severe, hot and cold at the same time.

Leather and lace.

A tear slides down my cheek once the car rolls out of the driveway.

He could've saved me. He could've put an end to this.

He didn't.

I'm still as unlovable as I've ever been.

I have to find out why.

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AURORA

Soft, warm lights. Comfy armchairs.

Babies. Ten of them.

Breathing. Sleeping.

Alone.

My heart has grown a life of its own. It shot up my chest and is currently lodged in my throat.

Since Everett's home disappeared from view, I've been choking on all these emotions that threaten to ruin me.

And no one gives a fuck.

Cormac didn't care that he had to hold me up by my arm as we walked through the hospital halls. He did what was expected of him. He brought me here, where everything is worse. The worst.

Every breath is a struggle. No matter how many times I shift in the armchair designated for me, I remain uncomfortable.

Gina, the nurse with the buzz-cut hair and kind green eyes, sits in the armchair to my right. Patient. Kind. As soft as the lights in the room are.

She hasn't probed or asked about my red-rimmed eyes. My trembling voice. My pale face.

Everett must be paying her generously to ignore my pain.

Bastard.

Gina, on the other hand, doesn't.

Her voice is tender. Her instructions on how to hold a baby have sounded more like suggestions than orders. She's kept the same even tone

as she demonstrated how to cuddle them and explained what it means to offer warmth.

When she said I could sing to them, it felt like an invitation.

I cleared my throat to try to hum, at least, and failed.

I can't get over my anxiety.

Can't.

I'd run the hell out of here, except Cormac blocks the exit.

I'm a prisoner in this room. Plagued by my worst nightmares.

The Clarkes' private pediatrician said I couldn't have been more than a month old when they found me on their doorstep.

The oldest baby here is twenty-three days old.

Those heartless people took me in when I looked like that. Small, fragile, and helpless.

I bet they hated me back then just as much.

I bet my mom loved me. She had to.

Her actions showed just how much she did. Breaking through my adoptive parents' gates and leaving me with a couple who had the means to give me a better life—that's love.

She couldn't know that the manicured lawns and gorgeous home were hiding monsters behind them.

She did what she thought was best.

I wish she were here. I wish I wouldn't struggle to breathe.

"There, why don't you hold him?" Affection shines in Gina's eyes. I'm grateful she hasn't mentioned his name to me. I begged for her to take it slow, and she's listening. "I promise he won't bite."

"No." I laugh, a watery and weird sound even to my ears. "He won't. I'll hold him, I promise. Next time."

A man clears his throat behind me.

Cormac.

Screw him and his orders.

"We'll go slow," Gina urges gently, hugging the baby boy to her pink scrubs. Hope and pleading filter into her voice. She knows neither of us has a choice in the matter. "Five minutes, and I'll take him back from you. As simple as that."

When I first walked in here, I refused to get too close to the babies. The emotional toll was overwhelming. Getting attached was going to destroy me altogether.

However, I must admit they are adorable. And, as I mentioned, it's not as if I have a choice.

I muster the strength to open my arms and scoot closer to her. My breath shudders. The lump in my throat has grown to the size of a football.

I should send a prayer to the heavens that Everett chokes on his lunch later today.

I don't.

Resenting him is impossible. He's wounded and spiteful. A warm piece of my heart worries that whatever might've happened to him was a tragedy.

That if our suffering were to be compared, he'd win this miserable contest.

That doesn't make my anxiety any less painful. The tears in my eyes are ever-present.

I have to do this.

Have to watch the baby boy since, any second now, Gina will place the adorable little thing in my arms.

He's nestled into her chest, swaddled in a white cloth. His lips are rosy and pouty. His patch of hair is almost black.

Then he flutters his eyes open.

Blue. They're as blue as the sky on a spring day.

As blue as the girl's eyes in the photo in Everett's library room.

A blue that resembles mine. Not quite, but…

The dread from earlier slams into me. Flattening my lungs. Stealing my breath.

I don't get why it hits me with such intensity, but it does.

The girl. Everett. The family photos.

Maybe she wasn't his close friend. Maybe she was his sister.

And maybe, maybe, I was too quick to dismiss the thought that she was my mother.

So, if Everett's sister were my mother…

If I have feelings for him…

If he fucked me…

Oh God.

Oh my God.

I think I'm going to be sick.

"Nurse Gina." Another nurse walks past Cormac into the room.

The two women chat while I’m being buried alive under a thousand metaphorical bricks.

A new scenario unfolds as I wait for her to return.

Though he didn’t look at the girl like he was in love, and neither did she, they could’ve been high school sweethearts.

They wouldn’t be the first teenagers to have unprotected sex. Or his condom could’ve broken.

They were so young.

As responsible as Everett is, he might’ve freaked out. So could have the girl.

They could’ve put me in the hands of the only married couple they trusted with this secret.

The girl, my *maybe* mom, was devastated by the whole ordeal and ran off.

Then, what if—what if the Clarkes wouldn’t let him see me when he came to his senses?

Winston and Molly are evil enough to tell him I never wanted to meet my biological parents. They might’ve said I was the reason he wasn’t allowed near me in the Royalty meetings.

Or it could’ve been my mom who asked for me, and they wouldn’t let her see me. She could’ve been consumed by grief. Might’ve run off from all that grief, then died of a broken heart.

That could’ve happened.

Then again… Is that how Everett avenges her? By fucking me? His child?

No way. No. Way.

This has to be my panic speaking.

Right? Right?

“Mrs. Alder.”

A hushed voice less than two feet away.

Gina is back. She’s talking to me. Me, Mrs. Alder.

Of course I’m her. Everett’s wife.

My face goes numb as a twisted question bubbles up.

In another life, could I have been Miss Alder?

“I’m back now.” Gina smiles. “Five minutes, what do you say? After that, I’ll pretend to teach you some more about newborns.”

I stare at her, my eyes bulging.

I’m supposed to hold a baby for the first time when I’m in this state?

Incest. Betrayal.

Lies. So many of them.

What the fuck.

Breathe. Just take a second and breathe. You can’t be sure that any of this is real.

Cormac clears his throat a second time.

Between deep breaths and a near panic attack, I open up my arms. I accept the baby into them, extremely careful of his head.

I’m doing everything in my power to steel the shivers, pushing all the disturbing thoughts to the back of my mind. I lock them there while looking after the precious baby.

Okay. Okay. I’ve got this.

My goodness, he feels even smaller in my embrace. Fragile. Lonely.

Desperate for warmth.

My heart aches for how he won’t ever know that while I was supposed to offer him exactly that, he’s the one who’s been warming me from the inside.

Little by little, this baby sneaks into my heart, soothing it.

Air floods into my lungs. Light filters into my soul.

The baby’s trusting eyes give me some of my sanity back.

There’s something in his gaze, even though he can’t actually see me. The innocence, I think, that settles my nerves more than anything else could.

I’m able to think clearly. To reconsider my fucked-up theory.

Especially the incest part.

I…I think I’m wrong. Pretty sure I am.

Everett isn’t completely unhinged. He wouldn’t have held a grudge over something a kid did or said. He wouldn’t have hated me for a message that Molly and Winston had passed on to him that could’ve been a lie.

He’s mean and ruthless. Sadistic and kinky.

But he wouldn’t have married his own kid for revenge.

Definitely not. In fact, I’ve never been this sure of anything in my life.

Okay, so what’s next?

“You’re doing great.” Gina pats my shoulder.

“Thanks.”

The baby keeps staring up blankly. He's in my arms, still. Safe. I split my attention between him and my husband. On the secrets everyone might've been withholding from me.

I have to figure out who that girl was. Why he hates me and my family.

Not just because knowledge is power. Sure, it could give me leverage over him.

My priorities have changed over time though.

Learning about my biological family is my priority. Even more so now, when my mom's identity could be within reach. When my husband could be my dad.

A sob catches in my throat. The baby's eyes drift shut. He lets out a cute huff and dozes off completely.

I still don't want to know his name. I refuse to get attached.

I have other things to figure out instead of navigating through my feelings.

A couple of minutes tick by before I finally have an idea.

Everett's clever. Sneaky, even. I don't have a chance in hell of catching him off guard.

He'll never blurt a single secret to me, especially after the *she* slip-up.

Someone else might.

"He loves you already." The optimism in Gina's voice is contagious. Despite myself, I shoot her a smile.

"He's sleeping."

"Same thing." She chuckles. "The five minutes we agreed on are over. So…"

"I'll tell you what." When I sneak a glance at Cormac, I find him texting. His shoulders are relaxed.

"Yes?" Gina's expression is open. Hopeful.

It warms me to my core to know these babies have her looking after them.

"This isn't as bad"—as terrifying, as numbing, as debilitating—"as I was afraid it would be. Maybe I could give another one of them some love after a quick bathroom break?"

Her lips curve up higher as she opens her arms to take the baby boy back. "Absolutely, Mrs. Alder."

"Just Aurora."

The giant rings on my finger don’t change who I am. To whom I truly belong to—myself.

Everett doesn’t really want me, anyway.

Sigh. “I’ll be back in a sec, promise.”

“Take all the time you need.” She nestles the baby to her chest, where he sleeps undisturbed.

At the sight of these two together, the tightening in my heart hurts like no other.

I feel like the only person who’s ever folded me into his arms was Everett.

How sad is that?

Cormac turns his head to me as soon as I stand.

No more wallowing. It’s showtime. “I need to use the restroom.”

“Okay.” He shoves his phone into the pocket of his black suit jacket. “Let’s go.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No, as in, I won’t pee if you’re there.” This excuse worked a handful of times on my parents’ bodyguards.

“I’ll wait outside.”

“I won’t be able to go if I know you’re there, period.”

He shakes his head, a sharp gesture that brooks no argument.

“For the love of God.” Showing, rather than telling, usually seals the deal. I spread my arms to the sides. “I don’t have a purse, any ID, or money on me. I have no one. Where and how exactly am I going to run?”

“Your parents could send one of their drivers.”

A mirthless laugh escapes me.

Seriously? Go to that nightmare of a house?

Yeah, right. Everett’s worst is the best time I’ve had in years.

My face says *I would never*.

When it dawns on him that I hate my parents, Cormac’s expression verges on pity. I don’t need it, but this isn’t about my ego.

“Okay. You’re good to go, but be back here in ten.” Cormac slips to the side, away from the door. “Last thing I want is to come between you and my boss.”

“Got it.” My heels click on the floor as I hurry out of the room.

Doctors, nurses, and other staff members roam the halls of the hospital. New parents and family members are also present. A baby wails from one of the strollers.

The antiseptic smell almost makes me gag. I swallow my disgust.

My mission takes precedence.

I cut to the right, disappearing into a darker hallway. Out of Cormac's line of sight and earshot.

A red-haired woman rolls her stroller, eyes half-closed. She looks nice but tired. Cormac wouldn't dare harass her with questions about me. I hope not. That'd ruin my plans and would be incredibly inconsiderate of him.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" I whisper despite our nearness.

"Yes?" She rubs her green eyes with the back of her hand.

"Could I maybe use your phone? My battery died, and I have to call my mom."

The new mom in the hospital robe nods and hands her phone over. "Sure. Here you go."

"Thanks." I grab her phone, going further into the hallway.

That's an extra twenty feet between me and Cormac, the watchdog.

I tap Molly's number on the screen, hit send.

And wait.

She answers almost immediately. "I have nothing to say about my daughter's—"

"Mom?" It's a habit, calling her by a title she hasn't earned.

Whenever I called her or Dad by their first names, I was punished. Either by being dragged into the basement or surviving on the bare minimum for a whole week.

"You," she hisses, her disdain for me rolling off her. She always hated me worse than Dad. "You have some nerve, calling here. After you humiliated us at the wedding. Not to mention, have you any idea how many calls we get a day? All these reporters asking for comments about the newlyweds? It's your fault."

"I didn't—"

"You did and you told them, somehow," she cuts me off. "You've always been ungrateful. Always trying to undermine us."

The hand at my side clenches into a fist. I bite down on the words I have for her.

Years of abuse. Of being held prisoner. Only allowed to leave when I scream like I'm a fucking lunatic woman—which, maybe I am.

None of the accusations leave my lips. There's no time.

Cormac gave me ten minutes. At the very least, I've used up four or five of those.

"Is Everett my biological father?" I blurt out the question before I lose my nerve.

I'm pretty sure he isn't, yet I have to ask.

"What?" A violent cough attacks her. Secretly, I hope she chokes and dies. Instead, she takes big gulps of air. Unfortunate. "No. *No*. He isn't your father. We're your—"

"Cut the crap, Molly." Relief surges through me, hot and wild. I'm able to breathe. To think. To use my voice against her. "You were never my parents."

Shit—I didn't mean to go there. No time. No. Time.

"Ungrateful little—"

"No, don't answer that." I talk over her accusations, over her enraged gasp. "So he isn't my real dad? Are you sure? Who is my dad, then?"

"You belong to us."

"Yes, yes. Whatever you say." I'd do anything to get to the bottom of this. Like being agreeable with her. "Just tell me who he is. Who my mom is. Who Everett is…to me."

"Aurora Coraline Clarke, I see what this is. My God, I cannot believe you!" Her scream is loud. I flinch at the deafening sound piercing my ear. "This call isn't about learning who your biological parents are. You're curious because you think you fucked your father. You fucked Everett! Who the hell gave you permission to lose your virginity? Winston is working day and night to help you escape this sham of a marriage. How is he going to marry you off to someone else now? What have you done? At least—dammit, at least tell me you're taking the pills I sent you. My God."

She's shocked? Really?

What did she expect from Everett?

The show of possessiveness he put on at the wedding. The fiery kiss at the altar.

He declared I was his.

He made it clear to everyone in the room that he was going to take my virginity.

And as if none of that happened, she's blaming me. If Everett hadn't had sex with me already, I would've marched home right now, waited until he was back from work, and offered my virginity to him out of spite.

"So if you know it's not him, does it mean you know who my real parents are?" I swallow my pride, demanding the truth from her. While she's this shaken, there are better chances of her slipping-up.

As I wait, a sudden feeling comes over me. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

I'm being watched.

Ready to run away from Cormac, I raise my head to see where he is.

Nowhere.

The woman who gave me the phone sings to her baby. People in scrubs go back and forth.

"We deserve to benefit from you." I can picture her cruel scowl. The grinding teeth. "But you just keep failing us. First, as a thief. Then, as a whore. Shame on you."

"Shame on *you*." I'm so over her. Over both of them. At least when Everett's being mean, he's passionate about it. If I'm lucky, I get a sliver of kindness from him. She and Dad were always cruel. Always. "You were going to whore me out yourself. You're just mad I did it on my own terms."

My own terms.

That's hilarious.

The truth is none of her business.

All they know is that I went into Everett's chambers with a sentence hanging over my head and came back out hours later as his fiancée. That's all she's getting out of me.

"Hmm." The clipped sound sends chills up my spine. This is worse than her screams. She's up to something. "You'll pay for this. Both of you will."

The line dies.

I start laughing another one of my weird, untethered laughs.

I keep laughing as I hand the woman back her phone.

I laugh all the way to the room where Gina, Cormac, and ten lonely babies wait for me.

Molly, making Everett pay?

Yeah, right.

He's the monster who slays other monsters, not the other way around.

My husband is the strongest man I've met.

The man who’s slowly but surely stealing my heart.
The one part of me I swore I’d never give to anyone.
No one and nothing will get to him.
For better or worse.
Everett is invincible.

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EVERETT

The courtroom is silent.

So quiet I can hear myself think.

And that's what I do. Think.

About the high-profile case I've been overruling for months. About the sentence I'm going to give to the child molester in front of me. How he's going to rot in prison for years.

Mostly, about Aurora, on her first day in the hospital.

While she's probably crying over cuddling babies, I'm. Fucking. Here.

I'm working when I desperately want to see the expression on her face.

Hug her. I want that too.

Shut up.

I shake her out of my head.

The victim's family is waiting for my sentencing. They're crying, their tears running over the dark circles under their eyes.

Their pain bleeds and soaks up the entire room.

I'm suffocated by it. The longer I look at them, the less I obsess over Aurora.

In a way, this is good.

Because this can't keep happening. The incessant craving can't keep holding my attention hostage.

Every second I spend around Aurora, every moment I'm reminded of her, my resolve to hurt her weakens.

If not for this sentence hearing, there's no telling what I would've done. I could've fucked up royally and pulled her out of the hospital. Kept her in my bed. Defiled her every hole until I got her out of my system.

I could bury my nose in her soft hair, kiss her, and tell her I'm sorry that either of us are stuck in this mess.

I silence that infuriating idea as soon as it rises.

Three dead people count on me to avenge them.

Which is why I don't dare leave work early. That's why I'm here, taking out the trash, like I did over the weekend. Since I don't need my lawyers reporting to me about Aurora's cases anymore, I cut out the criminal law division in my family's law firm.

Enough about them though. I focus on my courtroom, on this piece of shit Silva before I read him his sentence. Then, I dive into harsh and unforgiving sentencing remarks. I talk about right and wrong. About justice and responsibility. I let everyone here see just how seriously I'm taking my job.

While I do, I'm being assaulted by memories of my family. Of everything we lost. Everything we'll never have.

I use them as fuel, as justification for the harsh sentence I'll give at the end of my monologue.

People shouldn't be allowed to steal a part of another person's life and get away with it. They shouldn't be allowed to commit crimes against minors and cause them irreparable harm, like Winston did. Like Silva.

In the unfortunate case that they do, there's a price to pay.

That's why I've been put on this earth.

"Mr. Silva, you are hereby sentenced to serve the maximum term allowable under the law in a State Department of Corrections facility for You've been found guilty of rape in the first degree involving a minor." Reading his offense, I feel anger, hot and claiming, shooting through my veins. "Twenty years in prison."

I could've done worse. Could've pulled strings and sent him away for life, the same sentence I once threatened Aurora with.

But I have other plans for him. I called in different kinds of favors, paid off the right people. Made sure everyone in prison knows about the pedophile before he steps foot inside.

Twenty years inside will feel like a lifetime. That is, if he even survives the first month.

The room breaks out in applause. I slam my gavel.

“Order in the court.” My tone is calm but authoritative.

The bailiff steps forward, raising his voice to echo mine, reinforcing the command.

As expected, Silva’s attorney opens his mouth. Reminding me of the day Aurora heard her sentence. “Your Honor, the defendant has no prior convictions.”

As if that means anything. As if the kid he raped hurts any less just because Silva hadn’t done it or hadn’t been caught before.

“I’m well aware that your client doesn’t have a prior criminal record.” That burning, righteous fire in me is determined for justice to be served.

Wrath has my hand clenching into a fist beneath my bench.

Strangely, none of my anger is directed at Aurora this time. The need to take my revenge out on her isn’t even a whisper anymore.

What I feel for her is this ache in my bones. This longing to hold her, to fuck her. Watch her cry and beg.

Her pain, it’s so real. So potent that whenever I’m around her, I can taste it.

She isn’t like the rest of them.

Yet nothing can change the fact that Winston raised her.

The desire to hurt her has dwindled significantly. That’s true.

I’m no longer interested in impregnating her so I can steal the baby from her either.

Truth is, I’m not sure what it is I want from Aurora anymore.

The only thing I’m certain of is that I’m far from being done with her.

“But?” Silva’s attorney pushes, the rude fuck.

“But nothing.” My speech should’ve clued him in on where I stand. I won’t repeat myself. “Court is adjourned.”

This is my last case of the day. I leave the courtroom, head into my chambers, remove my gown, and check my phone.

A missed call. Cormac.

My heart gives a loud thump. A call this early in the day, that can’t be good.

I should be satisfied instead of worried. I sent Aurora there hoping she’d break down and cry.

A week ago, when I planned this, I salivated at the thought of this call. Of listening to Cormac tell me about her pain.

Satisfaction isn’t what I’m experiencing. This twisting in my gut. The clenching of my jaw.

This desire to go over there and protect her from the pain I’ve inflicted, I can’t stand it.

I lock the door behind me and return Cormac’s call.

“Hold on.” His voice is strained. “Mrs. Alder, I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

Her muffled, “Okay,” fucks with my head.

I need to see her. Need to hear about how her day was.

From her, like I told her I would.

But I want to hear the whole truth. Every bit of it.

Rubbing a hand over my jaw, I wait for Cormac.

My damn mind doesn’t settle by the time he comes back on the line. “Mr. Alder.”

“What’s going on?” I sound like a fool. Informal. Impatient.

I sound like I care.

I don’t.

“Mrs. Alder contacted her mother earlier today.”

Her mother? Out of all the things she could’ve said or done, she called that bitch?

Doubts gnaw at me, threatening to eat me alive. Sadness creeps in with them. Betrayal.

I thought she hated her parents.

But what if she doesn’t?

What if she’s been lying to me?

What other lies has she been feeding me then?

“And?” I snap, expecting to hear what they talked about.

If she’s plotting with them against me, I swear to God…

“I stalked her and eavesdropped from a distance,” he reports, calm and professional. “From what I gathered, they were arguing. Fighting, more like. I got there when Aurora asked her about her biological father. I can’t be sure. She didn’t get an answer, from the looks of it.”

“Good job, Cormac.” My relief is instantaneous. Her biological father. That’s what she was curious about. Not plotting against me. “Get her home. Now.”

“Will do.” He’s quick to hang up without questioning my orders.

I, on the other hand, am questioning everything. I pinch the bridge of my nose and think.

The Clarkes are a lot like me. Conniving and ruthless, hardly ever leaving anything to chance.

I'm having a hard time believing Winston and Molly haven't looked into Aurora's past. That they don't know who her parents are, who might pose a future threat to them.

With today's DNA tests and our families' reach, they could get into any database in the world.

Yet here they are. Lying to Aurora. I'm sure they are.

This isn't the first thing they've been withholding information from her.

Why?

Something isn't adding up. Something that could derail my plan.

Aurora is a Clarke.

A target worthy of my wrath.

I was supposed to punish her and them for everything.

And yet.

It's like she's a separate appendage, not one of them.

For the first time in years, doubts begin to infiltrate my thoughts. They're polluting my mind.

I could swipe them away. I could.

I do.

I'm never wrong. Not about them. Not about her.

They're guilty. I goddamn hate them.

I can't breathe while they're on this planet, living their consequence-free life.

Then again…

Over the last few days, I've realized one thing. Hating Aurora and wanting to fuck her aren't mutually exclusive.

I have to resent her. I *do* resent her.

But fuck, I need her, and I'm going to get her.

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EVERETT

"Hands and knees." The boredom in my voice is an act. Aurora has no idea.

My blood's been thick with desire since the ride home, my heart is pounding in my chest.

I can't stop admiring her.

She's gorgeous. Fresh out of the shower, her skin smooth. The collar is back around her neck. Rylee or Elena must've put it there, and goddammit, I'm jealous.

Jealous of the collar. Of them for touching her.

I don't let it show either, as I take in the rest of her.

Her hair falls like a curtain over her chest, thick locks spilling across the swell of her breasts. Her hair and her black silk nightgown are hiding her hardened nipples from me.

Un-fucking-acceptable.

My pulse hits my fingertips, begging me to brush those strands aside, to tear her nightgown down the middle.

Desperation clings to me. My control slips.

I want her nipples in my mouth. Want to mark her breasts until she's black and blue, until her tears spill onto my tongue as I ruin her.

There'll be time for that.

At the present moment, I'm hard as I envision torturing her.

By making my boredom believable.

It's real enough to send a shiver rippling through her.

Her breathing quickens, pupils dilate.

“I said…”

One blink, a single flutter of her dark lashes, and she drops to the floor.

Her deliciously terrified gaze doesn’t leave mine. Not for a second.

She’s panting and flushed on all fours, ready for me. Nothing has ever been as tempting. As soul-stealing. As seductive.

Desire, unlike any other, slams into me.

My ribs crack. Looking at her hurts on a visceral level.

I can’t imagine looking anywhere else.

The end of her hair kisses the floor. Her nightgown falls over the curve of her hips, sliding along her ass. Resting softly over her calves.

I left her only this nightgown on the center table in her closet. No bra. No panties.

The material is so flimsy that I can see she stayed bare underneath.

My cock jerks in my pants. Precum dampens my boxers.

I pull my lips in, admiring her from above.

Such a good girl.

Making me even harder in my pants.

Because it’s not just about how beautiful she is. It’s her character.

My rebellious little thief is here to make a trade.

Submissiveness and sex in exchange for my help.

It’s obvious in the way that she doesn’t call me names, doesn’t fight me or tell me she’s never going to the hospital again.

And while I don’t have the answers she’s looking for, I do want to offer her something for being so good.

I’m dying to let her have it, whatever *it* is. The dull ache in my chest, that’s what makes me do it.

Because she’s hurt. Her parents denied her the information she was owed. They lied to her.

I ache to walk over to her, to shield my wife from anything and anyone who might pose a threat against her.

What a ridiculous idea. Protecting her.

I’m not that person. I won’t ever be that person for anyone, much less for a Clarke.

Ever.

“Everett?” She bats her eyelashes.

I growl at the feelings she evokes in me. They have no place here, in my bedroom, between the two of us.

Silencing them is easy. I stalk over to the bedside table, grab her collar's remote, to punish her for being a temptation. For the doubts she plants in my head.

She either doesn't sense the danger or she doesn't care, spinning on all fours to look at me just in time for me to push the button on her remote.

The low current of electricity has her whimpering.

The second one lands me a pleading stare.

The third turns her elbows weak, and there she is. Dropping to her forearms.

Her eyes darken, drenched in lust. Ass rising high up in the air.

Beneath her nightgown, her thighs clench.

Yes. This is better. When we both know our place.

Her, waiting to be fucked. Me, dying to rail her.

"What were my orders when I stepped into the room?" My voice is sharp as a whip.

She rushes to push up on her hands. Her nightgown moves with her. It touches her in ways I wish my fingers would. My teeth.

Patience.

Aurora dips her chin. "I'm sorry."

An apology. From her. After being zapped.

Cute.

I see this game is far from being over.

"You're sorry?" I crack my neck. Roll my shoulders.

More tension takes over my body. Good thing I have her here to relieve it.

"I am." From this high up above her, with her head bowed low, her eyes look huge.

I don't want to drown in them. Don't want to think about them.

None of that.

Taking the remote with me, I cross the room and sit in one of my armchairs. My legs are spread.

Both hands over my thighs, I tell her, "Crawl to me."

In complete silence, she does just that, crawling on her hands and knees on the hardwood floor. Aurora's hips sway. Blue eyes fix on mine. There's desire in her stare.

She needs me.

She might need her answers, but she needs me more than that.

Fuck, my heart.

“You’re being good.” I tilt my head to the side. “What’s changed?”

A grateful sigh. “I have a question.”

My lips quirk up. “No.”

“No?” One of her hands slides up the length of my calf, her touch unsure.

My legs flex at that. At her obvious insecurity.

She’s tame, soft. I need more.

“Princess.” I grind my teeth, keeping my desire in check. “Haven’t you figured it out already? No means no.”

“But you haven’t heard me out.” The pout she’s giving me is real. She isn’t being bratty or trying to trick me.

She’s just being herself. Young. Beautiful.

Motherfucking innocent.

The hell she is.

“Don’t care.” Except I do. Winston and Molly are adamant about hiding Aurora’s biological parents’ identities, and I want to know why. Secrets are power. I’ll unravel theirs. “You’ll learn fast that being good doesn’t mean I owe you anything in return. You’re being good because you’re my wife. You’re my plaything, here to serve my needs.”

Truth is, she’s so fucking good that I’m having trouble breathing.

From the moment I stood in the doorway, she’s had me in a chokehold.

My fingers crave her. My tongue. My cock.

Her slender fingers on my calf—I need her to keep doing that.

If she insists, really insists, I might crack. I would give her almost anything.

“Okay.” That one word sounds so sad coming from her.

My entire body reacts to her beautiful surrender.

I shocked her, but I’m the one who feels electrocuted.

Refusing to act on it, I wrap a lock of her hair around my fingers and pull her closer to me. I lean forward, casting my shadow over her. “Tell me about your day at the hospital.”

She winces, blinking in confusion. My soft tone doesn’t make sense when I treat her this harshly.

“I had a great time,” she finally says, her tone flat.

Our bodies are as close as they can be. Her arms are pressed between my thighs, the front of them leaning on the armchair.

I bend another inch toward her.

Her breath hitches when she tries to free herself from my hold. I'm going to jerk off to this moment for the rest of my life.

"A great time? Really?" I hiss. "Lying to your husband won't fucking fly in this house."

"Fine. It was the worst." A flare of defiance flashes in her narrowed eyes. She wasn't planning on this. On me getting under her skin. That makes two of us. "Why bother asking if you already know how it went?"

Of course I know. On the way home, I read Cormac's detailed report.

The babies she held, I heard about them too. Her tears, fear, and reluctance were also part of his report.

None of that pleased me. Not really.

Hearing it from the source is what I'm after.

Her pain speaks to my soul. So does owning her.

My temples throb. I don't think this has anything to do with my revenge anymore.

I tug on her hair. "You're forgetting your place."

"I'm sorry, I—" Another lie rises in her throat. She thinks better of it, licking her lips. When I'm done with her today, they'll be swollen. Red. Mine. "As far as panic attacks go, it was bearable."

Of all the ways she could've described her day, she chose this. No complaining or whining. No overselling it so I'd pity her and put an end to this.

It's as if we're having a conversation.

Was that why she waited for me here today? Not to get answers?

She wants to talk? To me?

Whatever mind games she's playing, they have to stop.

Silence hurts. Silence cuts fucking deep.

So that's what I give her.

The longer I'm quiet, the softer she becomes. Sadder.

Her lips curve down. A low sigh leaves her pretty mouth.

"What's the point, anyway?" she murmurs, almost to herself. I watch in wonder as she transforms in front of me. As disappointment gives way to indignance. "I fucking suffered, okay? Great job, Everett. You did it. You traumatized me. Happy now?"

I’m anything but. I’m maddened by it.

By her.

The pressure in my cock is agonizing.

“Brat.” I yank on her hair, harder now. Tears spring to the corners of her eyes. Tears of pain. Tears of bravery. “You’re a temptation. The worst kind, Mrs. Alder. You’re getting punished for that.”

Her nostrils flare, her anger making me burn with need. “You’re the one who should be punished.”

“That mouth. I’m going to teach you a lesson.” I shake her head with my grip on her hair. “Take my cock out.”

“I hate you.”

“Don’t give a fuck.” I’m being cruel. The worst kind of man to this woman who occupies every hour of every day. “You had a question.”

She thinks I’m about to come back to her first question.

The hope in her eyes devastates me.

Me. I’m the one who’s suffering.

What the fuck.

A part of my chest caves in on itself. For the pain I’m about to inflict. For the hope I’m about to crush.

What the fuck.

Everything’s going according to plan, and I’m here, disgusted by my own fucking self.

I put the remote on the cushion beside me. “You asked me if I was happy.”

The corners of her eyes crinkle when she realizes I won’t indulge her. Her slumped shoulders are a blow to the gut. To my confidence.

“Well?” she asks eventually.

The profound sadness that’s ruining her, I can’t take anymore. I’m going to fix this, later, by unraveling her parents’ secrets.

Later. Now, I have to have her. Fuck, I need my greedy wife just as much as she seems to need me.

“I’ll be happy when those lips are wrapped around my cock.” I release her chin, ripping both her hands off my knees. My dick jumps when I grab one of them, pressing it to my length. Her fingers tremble. “When this filthy mouth sucks me off, that’s when I’ll be happy. So stop wasting my time. Take me out and do it.”

She nods mostly to herself, then starts unbuckling my belt. I lean back. Otherwise, I'll maul her. I'm already hanging by a thread.

"I have another question. My biological parents, who are they?" Her fingers are on my fly, lowering it. Big blue eyes look up at me. Hopeful, still. And dark. They get darker as she palms me over my briefs. "Tell me."

I grab one of her hands, sliding her fingers up to my waistband. Getting off on how she holds her breath.

Her lips are inviting but it's the redness on her cheeks that's my undoing.

Against all logic, I cup her cheeks, lean in, and crush my lips to hers.

I ravage her mouth, groaning, biting, nipping at her. Sinking my teeth deeper, drawing blood out of her.

She screams at me or for me, don't fucking care. She aches, and yet she's being so good.

Being obedient, she takes me out. My cock is in her palm, her fist so small around me.

Then her thumb rubs my precum over my slit, and I'm gone for.

"Goddammit." I yank her off me.

"Tell me." She strokes me like the virgin she is.

Squeezing. Testing. Slow and fast and wrong.

Doesn't make any difference. I'm hard as fuck. Pulsing. My hips jerk.

I'm losing my mind for her.

"I have no idea." That's the truth. The next part, though, isn't. "I don't care who they are. You, too, you're nothing to me."

"Liar." Aurora tightens her grip on my dick, baring her teeth at me. "I'm your wife."

She's right about that.

She's also wrong.

She's not *just* my wife. She's more than that.

After years with only Stafford as a friend, Aurora has slithered her way into my soul.

In more ways than I care to entertain.

"Shut up." Her hand is in the way, so I pry it off my cock. Holding the base, I shove her mouth on me. "Open up."

She says, "No," through sealed lips. While on her knees. Held down.

Humiliated.

Except I’m not the only one who’s turned on. Who’s in a powerful position.

Aurora is too.

“Open.” I release her hair so my hand is free to pinch her nose shut. Cutting off her air supply. “Up.”

Her whimper is adorable. Submission looks so fucking beautiful on her.

At the first touch of her wet mouth to the head of my dick, a feral grunt slips past my lips. She’s hot and wet around me, her lips stretching to accommodate my girth.

“That’s it.” I’m back to winding my fingers in her hair, dragging her up and down my length. “That’s fucking it.”

Her spit drips down my balls. Her gagging sounds reverberate on my cock. Her nails dig into my thighs, the pain making me feel alive.

It makes me hers. “Let me ruin those pretty lips. My pretty wife.”

She hums. Beautiful. Fuckable.

I shove her harder up and down my cock for thinking she could keep manipulating me.

“Do you think Molly and Winston will want to see you like this?” I’m bluffing, though she has no idea. She won’t until I tell her I lied. “What a whore I made of their daughter?”

God, her scream on my cock. The vibrations. The pain. Mine. All of her is mine.

“Enough.” When I pull her off me, her lips are swollen. They glisten with spit. Eyes shining in pain. “Hold still so I can take a picture of you.”

No one will ever have their hands on this picture I’m talking about.

But these emotions on her face.

I fucking love it.

Her eyes are wide with panic. “Don’t. Please.”

“Don’t?” This time, when I tug on her hair, she cries out. “You’re protecting them?”

“I don’t want anything to do with them.” Terror drips from her voice. Hatred too. “Please. Don’t.”

She’s always been honest, but this, her anguish, it’s raw.

The picture I was looking at all wrong starts to shift—no, clarify.

They did worse than keep secrets from her.

They alienated their only child.

For years, I believed she was a spoiled rich girl.

Living easy. Smiling behind closed doors, in the safety of her home, while I buried my family in the ground.

And all this time, all this goddamn time, she wasn't happy.

She was miserable.

Fuck me.

No doubt about it now. Aurora isn't one of them. She doesn't protect them.

Worse still, she's a victim.

My brow furrows. Voice lowering to a rugged whisper. "What did they do to you?"

"You said you didn't care," she snarls.

"You're right." It's a lie. It's an *I'll figure it out later. For now, I need inside you.* "I don't. I never did."

"Liar. You care. You care. You—" My phone is out of my pocket, getting me a delicious scream. "Stop! Stop, Everett!"

"Give me one good reason." I snap a picture of her.

The storm in her eyes. The scowl on her tortured face.

She's beautifully broken. My wife.

"I won't ask any more questions today. I'll be good." She spits out the last word, eyeing the phone I placed on the armrest beside me. "But don't send it to them. I don't want them anywhere near me."

"And?"

Aurora doesn't resist me as I bend to grab her by the hips. She goes up in the air, letting me spin her so her back presses against me.

Fucking her like this will be a tight fit, with her thighs pressed together. It's going to hurt.

She's going to feel every inch of me.

Her head bows down, her fingers trembling on my knees.

She's staying in place.

For me.

I've been terrible to her, and she chooses to stay. To hold on to me.

"And I don't have anything to bargain with so you won't send it to them." Her voice breaks, pain clawing through every word. "I've never had anything. I've got nothing now. I give up."

Her loneliness. The scars etched on her soul. I'm such an asshole.

Later, heads will roll, and that's a guarantee.

This instant, Aurora aches to be fucked even more than I want to have her. To be taken care of. I'm going to give it to her.

"That's where you're wrong." I bend her over until her hands touch the floor, holding her by her hips. I flip her dress up, groaning at how beautiful she is with her butt plug in her ass. "You have your cunt."

"You've already taken it."

"Stop interrupting me and get on my cock, princess." *Crack*, I spank her. "Fucking ride me. Come on me. If you fail to do either, your parents will get your picture." When hell freezes over. "They'll see your swollen lips. They'll know your pretty mouth was fucked by your husband."

I shift her, lifting just enough to angle her body the way I want, so when I take her later, sliding in will be effortless.

She looks over her shoulder at me, then twists farther to get a look at my wet, pulsing cock.

The flush on her cheeks is from both arousal and fear. "I'll do it. Because I want to."

Her body moves slowly toward me. Every part of her hesitates. Needs.

She tilts her hips up, exposing her pink, soaked pussy.

I'm seconds from railing her, hard. And when I do, I'm going to fill her up with our babies.

My patience has been hanging by a thread ever since I stepped foot into the house. There's nothing left of it when I imagine her belly bearing our child. Milk swelling her tits.

Watching her carry something both of us created inside her beautiful body.

I'll let her hold our babies instead of using them against her.

I'll keep both of them. All of them.

My brain is fucked. Fried.

I'm done waiting. I shove her on my cock, being a savage about it.

"Oh, *fuck*." I have a hand cupping her cunt, the other in her hair, tugging on her soft locks. Baring the side of her neck to me. The skin that the collar doesn't hide is so precious. I pull her closer, bite her. Suck on her. Mark her. "So fucking soaked. Look at you, princess turned into slut. My slut."

She moans, moving clumsily as she grinds onto my cock. She's never done this before, and with how tightly I'm holding her, she's limited as is.

The beautiful thing, what makes my balls tight and sets my lungs on fire, is that she's trying to please me.

Disappointing me scares her.

That fear is stronger than her doubts. Than her lack of experience. Her embarrassment.

And since she's trying so hard, I want to praise her. To encourage her in that filthy way she loves. "Sucking my cock turned you on, didn't it?"

When she nods, I slide my hand up her navel, then shove two fingers into her mouth. She licks her arousal off them, panting hard.

I'm throbbing, groaning. Feral.

"Being degraded has your pussy weeping for me." I move my hand down, pressing my spit-soaked fingers between her pussy lips, circling her clit. Pinching. Pulling on it to coax a scream out of her. "It feels so good, your pleasure. It shouldn't. I should hate you."

"If it helps," she cuts me off, each word sounding like a moan. "I hate you too. You're making me fuck you. You're making me come. I'll never want that."

"Such a fucking liar." My hips jerk beneath her, once. Can't help this base, animalistic nature to own her. "You waited for me today. You needed me."

"I needed—fuck. Fuck, fuck."

Her thighs squeeze when she comes. The violent orgasm has her shaking from head to toe.

She rocks her hips, begging for the very thing she denies herself. The thing I want more than anything. "No. No."

"That's a good girl." I lick her tears, tilting her face to capture the deep ache in her voice. "That's *my* good girl."

Her tongue finds mine, and there's truth in it. In that kiss. We can both hate what's happening between us, but it doesn't change the fact that it's there.

The last aftershock of Aurora's orgasm has come and gone. She sits on me, ass pressed to my body, tears leaking down her cheeks.

"Enough." Her hands soothe over my thighs. A plea to stop fucking her. To stop making her come. Whatever it is, it isn't as loud as before. "Enough. Let me go."

"What's that?" My lips brush against her ear, my fingers stroking her clit at a relentless pace.

She squirms against me, her tears slowing to a stop.

“You’re asking me to text your daddy your picture?” I lie to her because she’s hot for being humiliated. “For him to see his used-up princess?”

I spread her legs, just a little.

“Please.” She fakes being offended. But I see through her. I feel her. Her pussy clenches on me, her arousal leaking. She’s begging. “Anything but that. Please.”

“Then ride me.” In one swift motion, I put pressure on her back, bending her forward. “Need to fuck babies into you, wife.”

This change in me, these feelings, they’re erupting. It’s like the truth has been hiding inside me and now it’s tearing out of me, violently so.

“I’m on the pill.” Being in this position, Aurora can hardly obey me. But she tries, doing her best to take my fat cock. “Molly sent me my birth control pills.”

“Yes, she did.” I grip her hips, helping her grind on my cock while suppressing a smirk.

One day, I’ll tell her those pills were mints.

That I was trying to get her pregnant for all the wrong reasons.

That now I’m doing it for all the right ones.

I’m still the wrong man to be a father. Still the worst person to be the father of *her* children. To be her husband.

Fuck if I care.

“Anything could happen.” I use her. I spank her. I make her sweet body mine. I’m high on this, on letting myself have her. Really have her. “You’ll cry and hate me. You’ll carry our child anyway. *Fuck*, the thought alone. I’m about to fill you up. Shoot my cum up into you.”

“No,” she whispers, dread in her voice. Fake fear. “We can’t. Not us.”

“You say no, but look at you. Milking my cock.”

Digging one hand into her hip, I impale Aurora on my cock until she gasps. With the other, I work her plug in rhythm with my thrusts.

“That tight pussy. Begging for my seed.” I push the plug in as far as it will go. Tilting her body to rut into her at a new, painful angle. “Gonna put it where it belongs, princess. Got so much cum for you.”

Aurora’s second orgasm can probably be heard throughout the house. She cries out, moaning my name. The pulsing of her cunt sends me over the edge. I let out a groan as I spurt hot cum into her, draining myself until there’s nothing left.

“This.” I pull her up by her waist, lifting her off me and letting her rest on my chest. This way, I’m able to push my cum back into her with my fingers. “You, you belong to me. No other man. Not your parents. Fucking no one, Aurora.”

Her small hand grasps my wrist. Sad eyes lock on mine. “No babies, Everett. I won’t survive it if you take them away from me.”

She knows me too well already, has figured out that I once thought about doing this to her. That I was hellbent on wounding her in the most triggering and painful way, designed specifically to hurt Aurora.

“That’ll never happen,” I say and mean it. A tear leaks out of her eye, sliding down her flushed cheek, and I swipe it away. “Don’t even think about it anymore. I won’t rip our babies from you. We’ll raise them together.”

“You promise?”

“I…”

Guilt, stronger than ever before, crushes over me as I stare into her blue, watery eyes, as I comb my hand through her hair.

Everything hurts.

Everything.

I don’t deserve any of this. Not her. Not my family’s love.

I don’t deserve to live. To move on.

I have to get out of here.

“Everett?” Aurora’s cautious as she traces her fingertips along my jawline.

“Yes, I promise. Listen, I have some work to go over.” Slowly, carefully, I deposit her on the chair. Smooth her nightgown over and fix my clothes. I look down at her open, wanting expression, and I kiss her forehead. “I’ll be in my office. Go to bed.”

“Stay.” She pulls on my sleeve. Ignoring her, I bend over to get my phone. “We need to talk.”

“We’ll talk when I say so.” Self-loathing tastes sour on my tongue. I head out of the room, anyway. “Go to bed. Defy me, and I’ll tie you up.”

“You’re a bastard.” Her sad whisper chases me into the hallway.

“I can’t be anything else,” I murmur to myself. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

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EVERETT

The clock indicates it's around midnight when I step back into our room.

Our?

Yes. Our.

I'm too tired to analyze it, anyway.

The exhaustion isn't physical though. I don't yawn. My eyelids don't droop.

My head's a mess from the way Aurora got to me earlier. How I touched her, how I spoke to her.

My…

Fuck that. No. I don't have a heart.

I have needs. I have desires.

I have her.

I lose my clothes.

Naked and wanting, I hover by our bed and watch her while she sleeps.

Beautiful. Vulnerable.

Finding pleasure in her is wrong. Getting attached to her is as disrespectful as spitting on my family's graves.

Exhaustion gives way to hunger.

She's naked on her side, relieved of her collar, showered and perfect.

My eyes roam over her body. Feasting on the shadows and highlights that play on her face.

Her dark eyelashes fan over her rosy cheeks. She reaches me without even being awake for it.

I don't turn on the lamp.

Once I do, she'll wake up. We'll end up talking.

This little brat wasn't done with me when I left.

Back then, I was stronger. I might give in to her now.

My goals will get blurry. Muddy. More than they already have.

A fist locks around my lungs, pushing all the air out.

Feels a lot like regret. Mostly from not being able to love her like she deserves.

My fingertips stroke her skin, the beginning of an apology. Uncertain, quiet, almost tender.

I'm caressing Mrs. Alder's cheek. Her shoulder. Her bare arm.

Mrs. Alder.

What used to be a formality is a tether now.

Whatever barriers I've put between us, they're not going to last.

In fact, they're crumbling, and fast.

So fast that I let myself surrender to this moment.

I climb into bed, facing my sleeping wife.

Watching her. Admiring her, against all logic. Against my will.

I long for her.

Stafford was the one who called me out on it first. Two years ago, at one of those Royalty gatherings. He saw what I couldn't.

Every year since my parents died, in the same month, Aurora would show up at the Royalty's mansion.

And every year, she'd keep to herself. Quiet, guarded, throwing glances that were more suspicious and scornful than anything else.

I'd seen her before. But that year was the second time I really looked at her. Noticed how fucking beautiful she was, that twenty-year-old woman.

The pull to her made me want to scream.

It put a crack in my revenge plans. The lines were blurred.

I denied it. Of course I fucking did.

My friend wouldn't let me.

"You should go talk to her," Stafford said, low beside me, sipping that damn sparkling water. "She seems…different."

"I will. Eventually," I said, hardly able to tear my gaze away from her silver dress, her curves, those cold blue eyes.

That iciness in her. The underlying loathing. What brought it there?

None of it made sense.

The Clarkes gave her everything. She didn't lose what I had.

She wasn't allowed to be angry.

I wasn't allowed to like her.

"When I take her against her will." My gaze cut to Stafford's. "I'm not her friend. I'll never be."

He sighed. "I didn't mean as her friend."

I understood damn well what he'd meant.

Still, I wasn't going to flirt with her. Fall in love with her.

I didn't need that.

I don't.

My hand remains as insistent as it was a second ago. It rests on Aurora's hip.

At night, it's easier to let go. To give in.

I move closer to her. So close that if I shift her like that, her lips rest on my shoulder.

Her shallow breath lights my skin on fire.

There's no denying what's going on here. There really isn't.

Aurora has made a home for herself inside my heart. The organ I believed was lost for good.

Resentment and longing turn me into a weak person.

Not weak enough to forgive her parents though.

Winston will suffer. In a few weeks, after this forced marriage and my future actions bring him to his knees, he will.

That's what I need. What I *want*. Destroying him and his wife.

Not Aurora, not anymore.

Until I've dealt with the other Clarkes, I'll keep my distance from her. It'll cut her, but better that than leaving her with a weak excuse for a husband.

Marriage, true love, goodness—this connection to Aurora that I can no longer resist—I don't deserve any of it. As long as my revenge on Winston isn't over, I'm not worthy of anything.

Especially not of Aurora's love.

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AURORA

A week has gone by since Everett punished me.

Since we had an actual conversation.

Since he told me he couldn't be anything other than a bastard.

Apparently, he could. See, Everett hasn't been his usual cruel self since.

He hasn't been ignoring me either.

But lines like *Good morning*, *Good evening*, *How's your day been?* and *Open up if you want to eat* are just as bad…if not worse.

It's awful, these slivers of his attention. Of his words.

They're a reminder of what he won't let me have—his touch, his affection. As much as I've resented both, I need them. I need him.

He might be terrible, but he's mine. He's the first and only man I ever had a crush on.

The only person who genuinely looked at me. Saw me.

Every day, I give it my everything, trying to bring him back to me.

I crawl to him as soon as he steps through the door of our bedroom after work. Wear the butt plug he loves so much.

I want to believe he's trying too. Everett pats my head, his mouth twitching. The emotions that are locked behind his sharp façade are fighting to break through.

When he thinks I'm asleep, Everett lies beside me. He whispers *wife* like it means something. Like I mean something. He puts his arm around me. Slides close to me, pressing his hard body to my back.

But only when I have my eyes closed and my breath under control.

It’s these moments that I know that his feelings for me have evolved.

No more hate. No more resentment.

Actual feelings.

And then I wake up. Then, all I get is his cold shoulder and our routine.

Slowly but surely, loneliness has been wrapping itself around my bones. Every night, while I wait for Everett to return to our bedroom, I’m nothing more than a wretched heart and conflicted thoughts.

Baby number three yawns in my arms, the soft sound pulling me back to the present moment, to the hospital.

I’m such a hopeless idiot, obsessing over Everett and my fucked-up marriage when I’m watching over her.

This newborn girl, whose name I refuse to learn, is tiny and calm. At peace. I have to cuddle her. Make sure she’s safe, which she is.

At least I can cuddle her without losing my shit.

I don’t cry before I come here anymore. I can lend these babies genuine warmth, even if my heart has been deserted in a metaphorical storm. Soaked and cold and lonely. So fucking lonely.

Regardless, I focus on the task at hand. I’ve been determined to get better at this, if not for myself, then for the newborns here.

Knowing that I’ve managed to pull it together somehow puts a smile on my face.

Gina talks to me about a movie she saw yesterday evening, and I try to listen to her.

Except my mind reverts to my husband. To what *we* were up to last weekend. What we haven’t been up to, to be exact.

Sex. We’ve done none of that. Even though he hadn’t gone to work, Everett still avoided me. He avoided me other than sharing meals or sleeping in the same bed.

He wouldn’t give us a chance.

He might have feelings for me, but maybe he’s better off without them.

Maybe he’s better off without having to deal with me.

My eyes are hot. My vision gets a little blurry. Then I blink, and two tears trickle down my cheeks. Landing on my black blouse.

“Are you okay?” Gina’s hand is warm on my shoulder.

I’ve come to learn that the woman is touchy-feely in a non-invasive way. She’s made an art out of her profession. When her hand is on me, my heart slows. The tightness in my chest eases.

I clear my throat. “I’m fine.”

No more tears. Cormac is watching and will report to Everett. Plus, I have a green-eyed orphan to cuddle.

But my stupid thoughts won’t go away.

Maybe I’m not too much. A strong man like Everett can tackle any project he puts his mind to.

That still doesn’t explain why he’s changed after last week.

Must be something else then.

A sigh rushes past my lips. I hug the small baby girl closer to me, shushing her. Shushing myself.

“What do we have here?” Gina sees through the defenses I’ve built around me. Her arms are outstretched; her look is one of conspiracy. I’ve been here long enough to recognize the dipped chin and wide eyes for what they are. “It smells like someone needs a diaper change.”

Our secret code for *Let’s trick Cormac and give you a break*.

At her sneakiness, a plan begins to form in my head.

Earlier this morning, determined to fix things between Everett and me, I snuck out of our bedroom while he was in the shower and stole one of Jane Doe’s photos, shoving it into my pocket. I also took a couple of twenties from the drawer in his bedside table.

Honestly, I had no idea what I’d do with either.

Until now.

I’m going to use the photo and the money to get to my childhood home and finally have my answers.

Once I force the truth out of my adoptive parents, then Everett and I can start talking.

With nothing between us, we could heal each other.

Thankfully, I’m in flats instead of heels today—the perfect outfit to wear on the run.

But my relief is only momentary.

Because I’ll be forced to face them.

My stomach dips at the idea of visiting my parents’ home.

No. Enough of this. I won’t let fear deter me.

I clear my head, considering the next steps I have to take.

It’s pretty solid. By the time Cormac realizes I’ve escaped through the bathroom window, I’ll already be gone.

I've got this. "Am I that obvious?" I refer to the diaper change comment, raising my voice enough for it to reach Cormac.

"Oh, Aurora." Gina's laugh rings out, genuine and carefree.

Jealousy stabs through me, then hope surges. Maybe I could be more like her one day, if Everett and I ever make it.

"Here, let me take her."

In my periphery, I catch my bodyguard eyeing both of us.

I rub my stomach, twisting my lips. "Thank you."

On my way to the door, I hug my middle with one arm. My cheeks have to be flushed with embarrassment for it to look real. I force a humiliating memory to rise. Like the first time Everett spat coffee into my mouth. His order after I gulped down the lukewarm fluid that tasted of him.

Lick my lips clean.

Sharp and filthy. That one sentence gets the job done.

Heat flares across my face like wildfire, catching in my throat, blooming across my chest.

Cormac's stoic expression morphs into a questioning one. "Mrs. Alder?"

"I—" My forehead creases. Collared, plugged, ring on my finger, and I still can't get used to this name. "What?"

"What's wrong?" He's firm at the door. Unmoving. "You need medical assistance?"

"I have to use the bathroom." As always, when I need to go, I try to sidestep him.

"Wait." He holds his hand up. "You haven't answered me. Is it serious?"

I bite my tongue, masking my satisfaction at fooling him.

"No, I just…" I shift on my feet. "Don't make me say it."

"Oh, I see." Realization sets in. Cormac, ever the professional, clears his throat and moves out of my way. "Maybe this time you'd rather I waited outside for you?"

The look I shoot him is a mixture of *When have I ever?* and *Please, I really have to go*.

Since he sort of trusts me, he nods once, staying rooted in place.

I hope he won't get fired for this.

I hope, more than anything, that this trip will get me what I need the most.

That no matter how painful it might be, I'll come home tonight with the key to my husband's heart.

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AURORA

The taxi dropped me off outside my childhood home minutes ago, and I've been standing here since, gathering the courage to walk in.

Or maybe I'm waiting for my collar to buzz. It's useless, wishing for that.

I must be out of Everett's reach. There's no tracker on me either, or Cormac would've been here by now.

Everett would've been here. Because he has feelings for me.

That's the reason I'm here, isn't it? His soft touch late at night. His whispered words that he doesn't want me to hear.

I have to be brave if I ever want us to be more than that.

God, he must be furious.

His jaw must work. Fists clenching.

He must think I've run away for good.

I run my fingers over my rings, drawing comfort from every diamond facet. From the smooth gold wedding band.

He might punish me for this stunt. He'd do it in ways that'd leave me crying and screaming for him to stop.

Denied orgasms. Extreme humiliation sessions. Ignoring me for weeks.

I'd take anything from him. I'd wait out the storm.

Then maybe we could actually talk. About everything. I hope.

God, I hate this place.

I can't wait to tell Everett I didn't want to come here.

This conversation, I wish I'd have with him instead of my dad.

Unfortunately, Molly and Winston are my last resort. If Winston is even here. It's too early, unless he's working from home. Or—fuck, I'm blabbering inside my own head.

My pulse quickens as I approach the access control keypad by the gates. I'm shivering from head to toe.

I'm also running out of time.

Once Everett gets over how angry he is, he'll come here. He'll realize I didn't have any other options since I'm not supposed to have money on me.

Punching in the code makes the tall metal gates glide open without a sound. As I step past them, the front door cracks open in the distance.

I don't even see who's in there, and I'm already flinching. My instinctive reaction to years of abuse.

Breathe, Aurora. Breathe.

Air in. Air out. I walk faster. Make myself stand taller.

This is for Everett. For both of you.

I lift my chin, not feeling any safer for it.

Pretending will have to do.

The door opens wider. A heartless man in a dark suit stands in the doorway.

My adoptive father.

He didn't let one of the staff get the door. He's home, and he answered it by himself.

He's about to deal with the problem. With me.

I force thoughts of Everett and my fear out of my head. Winston won't see how scared I am. I'm not here for his entertainment.

"Hi." I'm within hearing distance. A light breeze whips through my hair and slides under my shirt. I refuse to wrap my arms around myself. He'll consider it a sign of weakness, and I am not weak. "I need to talk to you."

"You're not wanted here." His lips twist into a disgusted snarl. "In fact, you're trespassing. So until I'm able to get you out of this mess and find you a suitable husband, you're banned from this house. Get off my property."

An unexpected sting brings tears to my eyes. Normally, when I'd feel brave like I should now, I'd have a witty remark to spit back at him.

Other days, when my hate for him and Molly was so big it couldn't fit in my bedroom, I'd give him the finger. That was a surefire way to land myself hours, if not days, in the basement.

Today—if I'm right about this secret no one lets me in on—I'm at his mercy. I need his cooperation.

I blink back the tears.

I'm Everett's wife, and I have to act like one. Like an extension of him.

Ready. Set. Go.

"Are you going to shoot me?" My sass gets on his last nerve, like I hoped it would. The vein in his neck throbs. "*Dad*?"

"Where's your husband?" he spits out.

Will probably be here sometime soon.

"This has nothing to do with him." A few steps closer put me almost within his reach.

Close enough to show him he doesn't scare me. Far enough not to put my head in the lion's mouth.

"This is between you and me. And Mom."

"Your mother isn't here." He holds onto the door, knuckles whitening. His eyes are calculating, despite his hate. "Are you back for good? You got out of your *situation*?"

Giving him more of my attitude, I raise my left hand. Wiggle it. "What does it look like?"

"It looks like you're a whore." His nostrils flare. "After what your mother told me, I have no doubt that you are."

He's trying to get under my skin. I won't let him. I don't say a damn thing until I'm calm again.

"If you've been taking your pills, though…" Winston's tone turns contemplative and derisive all at once. "I'll have my lawyers on your case. No one from Everett's firm, that's granted. Schedule a meeting with my assistant, and we'll see what we can do for you."

I don't tell Winston that losing my virginity wasn't my choice. That had it been up to me, Everett and I would've at least gone on one real date before it happened.

It's none of his business. This is between Everett and me, and I've forgiven my husband. I accept him, even at his cruelest.

"I'm not leaving my husband." I lift my chin and speak in that low, intimidating *Everett* tone. "I do have a question, however. And you might have the answers I need."

"Your mother already told you, we don't know anything about your parents." His breath is ragged. His rage is barely contained. "The only thing

we know is that it's not the husband you're fucking like the whore you are. Get out of my face."

If you hadn't hurt Everett, I wouldn't have been his whore, wouldn't I?

"Stop lying to me." Since this isn't the conversation I'm here for, I silence my accusations. What's the point anyway? "You know it wasn't him, so you do know something. You owe me answers."

"Bold of you to assume I owe you anything." He takes a step back, gesturing for me to enter my prison. "But we can negotiate…daughter."

The information I'm interested in is bigger than my ego. Far bigger than the fear that sinks its claws into me.

Bracing myself for the worst, I head inside.

The door shuts behind me, and it's loud. It's thundering. I'm lucky to catch my gasp in time.

It's just a door.

It really is. Not letting him squeeze a word in, I spin on my heel.

"Who is she?" Shoving the picture I stole from Everett is awful. This picture, this girl, they're dear to my husband, and Winston is looking at her. I hate myself for it. "Is she alive? Is she dead? She's dead, isn't she?"

His face turns from white to purple in a matter of seconds. He blinks, pressing his hands to his hips.

I tuck the picture back into my pocket. I've violated Everett's privacy for long enough. "Was she my mom?"

Winston's eyes are on me. "She was no one."

Judging the change in him, I see that she was definitely someone. Someone important.

An intricate part of his life. Of Everett's.

And he said *was*. How did she die? What the hell happened?

Why won't anyone talk to me?

"Tell me who she was. I'll leave after that." Having him lie to my face ignites something hot and unforgiving inside me. "Who was she? You knew her. I can see that you did. So answer me. Was she my biological mother? Who was she to Everett? To you?"

"Last warning, Aurora."

"I'm not leaving until you answer."

"Insolent piece of trash," he snarls and—

Bam.

His fist connects with my cheek.

Black spots dot my vision. I stumble back, staggering. Eventually, I find myself on my ass.

“Bastard.” I seethe, feeling my cheek swell beneath my fingertips. “Who was she?”

“She was no one,” he repeats, his hand gripping my hair. As he drags me outside, I fight him. I scratch his hand. I kick my feet against the floor. “A nobody, you hear? Just like you.”

He’s right.

He’s so right.

Not about her. About me.

I’m a no one.

The realization is the most brutal blow of everything he’s said to me in a while.

Had I been someone to Everett, I would’ve had a tracker in my rings. On my collar.

He would’ve been here, chasing down his wife.

Headlights would shine along the driveway. The intercom would’ve buzzed as he demanded entrance.

But Winston’s right.

I’m a no one.

A no one whose scalp is on fire.

Winston hauls me the last few feet and throws me onto the porch.

I land on the stairs, hard. So hard that I go tumbling down the stairs and to the driveway.

“You’ve caused a lot of trouble, Aurora.” Winston points his finger at me while I scramble to stand up. “Way I see it, you aren’t my daughter anymore.”

I never was.

“Unfortunately, to the outside world, you always will be.” He’s out of breath, hands on his hips. “I hope you’re happy to have fucked us over. Ungrateful brat. Unless you’re ready to discuss a divorce, stay out of here.”

My cheek throbs where he hit me, heat blooming beneath the skin. My ass still stings from being tossed like a useless piece of trash.

“Fuck you,” I spit out, then literally spit on his driveway.

“No, fuck you.”

I shake my head and walk off, dragging the last scraps of my pride behind me.

He’s right about another thing, I realize, on my way out of this place I used to call home.

The girl in the photo and I, we aren’t that different. But not because *we’re nothing*.

As it seems, both of us swam in shark-infested waters. We both meant something to both men.

What happened to her?

I don’t know.

Can’t even think straight when my heart hurts so bad.

I let Winston get to me, let him crack my resolve.

Where’s the biggest, worst monster when I need him?

My monster?

Nowhere.

I’m alone. Painfully alone.

Outside the mansion, the street is empty. There’s no sign of his Mercedes. His large silhouette isn’t here.

I could run off to another city. Another state. It would take them weeks, if not months, to track me down.

Except…there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

Even if Everett doesn’t care, I’m still going back to him.

Self-pity’s as pathetic as the sob that escapes me.

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” I stalk off toward the main road.

Since I ran out of money on the ride over, I’m trying to figure out the way to Everett’s house on foot. Just a few more miles—at least, I hope. Then I’ll be there. With him.

I’ll be home.

Where Everett could shout at me. He could zap me.

He could fuck me until I pass out.

After that, he’d be gentle again. While I’d sleep, he’d offer me some type of warmth.

I need it more than air right now. It’s fucked up, but I do.

I just do.

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EVERETT

"Where's my wife?"

That was the first question I barked at Cormac when he called me around noon.

As soon as his name flashed on my phone, I knew.

My cases, my job, the lunch I had delivered to my office. None of that mattered.

Aurora was gone.

"She ran off. I can't find her."

Straight to the point.

My wife disappeared, and since then, I've been looking for her.

First, my driver took me to the hospital, hoping for clues. Cormac had watched the security tapes tracing her last steps, but I needed to see them for myself.

There was nothing on them that could tell me where she'd gone.

Without a credit card or money, it made sense that she couldn't have gotten far.

I dismissed my driver and took the car, roaming the streets by myself. I needed to be the person to track her down. To protect her.

Me.

Around and around I went. Pulled up to every storefront in the area. Entered each one looking for her.

She couldn't have gone to her parents. The things she told me about them, there was no chance she'd turn to them.

So I looked for her anywhere else for two hours straight.

Looking for another missing girl I cared about dragged me down the worst kind of memory lane. Yet there I was. Scouring for her.

During this time, my nerves were frayed. The worst-case scenarios ran through my head.

I cursed myself for being too vain to install a tracker in her collar.

Aurora was resourceful. Of course Cormac couldn't stop her from running away. No one could.

I have no idea where she went. But I'm done driving aimlessly. I'm going to wait for her at home.

This sheltered, naïve woman. My woman. Out there, on her way to freedom. Except without money, without a place to stay, she has to be lost. Hungry.

She—

She'll be back here.

She'll have to face my wrath.

After I hug her. After I search every inch of her body for injuries.

Where could she have gone?

Old fears and frustration threaten to suffocate me. I'm livid. Powerless.

Furious.

Aurora could be injured. A man could've jumped her. Raped her. Left her for dead.

I park the car violently in the driveway instead of in my garage and storm in through the front door of my home.

The nearest vase is in my hand. Before I know it, it's shattered against the wall.

My staff wisely clears the entryway. I stare at them as they disappear into the house.

What was I thinking, coming here to wait for her?

I'm heading back out to find her.

Right now.

Car fob in my hand, I'm almost out the door, crossing the foyer.

Then the handle of the front door rattles. A fist slams on the thick wood.

I stand there like a fool, my heart in my throat.

The doorbell rings.

One of my staff members appears in my peripheral vision. I snap out of it, flick my wrist, ordering him to leave.

This has to be Aurora.

It's my face she'll see first. My arms will fold over her.

The moment I fling the door open, I'm able to breathe again.

That is, until my eyes lock on her bruised, swollen cheek.

I'm going to die of a broken heart. Of a wrath so powerful it bursts out of me in flames.

"Aurora."

She's hurt.

Another person made her cry.

Another person touched what's mine.

Her chin dips. Hands wringing. "I'm sorry."

Not here. Not fucking here, in the entryway when she's this exposed. This broken.

I scoop her in my arms, slam the door shut, and storm up to our bedroom.

"I said I was sorry."

Another glance at her, and I know there'll be hell to pay. She won't be the one punished for this. Whoever did this to her, they'll be sorry. So fucking sorry.

"Don't punish me," she whispers.

"Stop apologizing."

We're alone in my room, isolated from the outside world. My chest constricts, still raw from before.

Worrying over someone you love is the worst kind of pain.

"I'm sorry." Tears roll down her cheeks.

She looks tiny. Fragile. Precious.

"I said I don't want your apologies." I sit both of us down on the edge of the bed.

She's on my lap, silently crying. Her weight is warm and grounding, her body still except for the subtle hitch of each breath.

I wrap my arms tighter around her, as if that alone could stop her from breaking apart.

I can't stand it. I'm choked by it. By her swollen fucking cheek.

Before I burn the world down, I have to take care of her. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear is a start. I'm doing everything, and I mean *everything*, to control my temper.

Big, round eyes gaze up at me. "What do you want?"

“A name.” My throat tightens, remembering what a failure I am. I cup her swollen cheek, absorbing her pain. Trying to take it from her. “Who did this to you?”

Her chin wobbles. “Since when do you care?”

I slide my hand down to the side of her neck, groaning at the thrumming of her blood, her life source, beneath my palm.

She’s wounded.

She’s here.

Alive.

And at last, I don’t resent her for it.

My family didn’t have to die so that Aurora would live.

I was wrong to think the two things were mutually exclusive.

They aren’t.

Aurora is a true innocent.

She’s my present. My future. My everything.

She isn’t a compromise either. Not someone to fill the emptiness in my heart.

Revenge or not, I would’ve ended up marrying her. Would’ve put babies in her stomach.

I would’ve given her the world, just because she’s *Aurora*.

That doesn’t make me love my family any less. It simply means I have space to love all of them.

“You’re my wife. Isn’t that enough?”

The look in her eyes is wary. Of course it is. She’s used to hearing me use that title like a weapon.

No more of that.

No more space between us.

No more guilt keeping me from touching her.

I’ve spent the past week pulling back, convinced that loving her made me weak. That wanting her would dull the edge of my revenge. Most of all, I didn’t deserve her.

I’ve been wrong about it just like I’ve been wrong about everything.

I’m going to fix it like I should’ve a long time ago.

Years ago, apparently.

“Okay, you want to hear it? All of it? I care about *you*. As Aurora, not just my wife, okay? Good enough for you?” I lean in, pressing my forehead to hers. Chest too hot. Too tight. “I fucking care. Deeply, Aurora. I

shouldn’t. I tried not to. But I care. More than I’ve ever cared about anyone in years.”

“You do?” she whispers, doubt thick in her voice.

“Yes.” I inhale her. This moment.

Her grip on the lapels of my jacket is sure. Small, determined fingers that won’t let go.

Aurora feels safest with her monster. Me. “You care? About me?”

I don’t do love declarations.

Facts are easier. Cleaner. Safer.

“I missed you.” I search her gaze. She needs more from me, so I give it to her. “I was wrong.”

Her mouth rounds in the shape of an O.

“Yes, I missed you.” That’s one way to put it.

Denying myself Aurora has been a nightmare.

I’ve been lost without her.

The way she talks back, it hurts how much I’ve longed for that.

Days and hours have gone by, and I ached for her weight in my arms. Her lips on mine. I jerked off to the memories of her tight cunt and hot mouth around my cock, and it did nothing for me.

My hands belong here, tangled in her soft locks.

“I was wrong to keep you at arm’s length.” The feel of her palm on my jaw is warmth I don’t deserve. “You see, I couldn’t stand hurting you. But I couldn’t give you what you needed. Affection. Compassion. Kindness. I’ve been this one person for years. I had one goal, and it blinded me. I hurt you. I’m not a good man, Aurora. After what happened, when I finally pieced the broken parts of me back together, I wasn’t the same person I used to be… before.”

That’s as much as I can tell her right now. I love her, and fuck, I can’t say that either.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever be him again. But you’ve made me feel again.” Looking at her sad, hopeful eyes, I go on, “And that scares the hell out of me. I’m bad for you, and still, I can’t stop wanting you. Caring about you. I can’t.”

With that off my chest, I return to focus on what’s truly important.

Purple paints the bruise on her swollen cheek. I’m this close to punching a hole through the nearest wall.

“Who was it?”

“Everett.”

“I’m never letting go. Ever.”

“Everett.”

She won’t tell me who it is before she speaks her mind. I see it in her eyes.

“What is it?” I move both hands to her neck. Her pulse. Her breaths. I’m going to feel all of it. “Tell me.”

Her chest expands slowly. Whatever she’s about to say costs her, just like confessing to her cost me.

“It’s been such a shitty week.” Her fingers tremble on my jawline. “Then, when I ran off, you didn’t even zap me. I thought—”

“Zap you? While you were out there by yourself?” My eyes are drawn to the bruise. To Aurora’s lips. Every delicate feature. She’s strong, but my fucking God, is she fragile. I should’ve been there. “So someone could’ve taken advantage of you? You’re mine. Don’t you get it? No one’s allowed to put their filthy hands on you. I wanted—no, needed—you back. Alive. Well. Not dead or wounded.”

A storm brews inside me. My muscles strain. Adrenaline pulses through me.

The wrath inside me is about to tear through my skin. It’s going to rip my suit to shreds.

Back then, I couldn’t protect my family. I’m stronger today. More powerful than I’ve ever been.

I’ll protect her.

If it’s the last thing I do.

“You really care.” Her delicate fingers slide to my neck. My nerves are so raw that the sensation has my teeth locking. “About me.”

“Of course.” It hasn’t been clear to either of us, though it should have. “You’re mine.”

Aurora twists in my hold, straddling me. My dick is hard. My teeth ache to bite into her tits. Her flesh. Anywhere I can leave my mark.

A force greater than lust restrains the beast inside me. I have to sit here and listen.

I place a hand on her hip. The other is locking her wrists together, derailing her path to undo my pants.

“Stop it. Who did this to you?” I grit out. “Give me a name. Give me the last location you’ve seen them. Something. Anything.”

“Let me show you.”

Instantly, I loosen my hold. Hoping she has a note, a street name.

Her attacker’s license plate.

This isn’t a piece of paper she’s fishing out of her pocket. She raises a crumpled photo between us, shaking.

Time stops.

It’s my sister’s photo.

“Why?” I push the word out, barely. I’m wound too tight to say anything else. “Why?”

“My parents—err. Winston and Molly.”

I’m pleased for all of a second that she corrects herself.

The warmth doesn’t last. My dead sister’s bright smile shines back at me. Aurora has her picture.

Why?

“You wouldn’t talk to me. I figured…” She blinks back tears. “I assumed that Winston might’ve known who she was. He could’ve told me. I could’ve understood why you’d ignored me and fixed it. Fixed us. I was desperate, Everett. I’m sorry. I just wanted to fix us.”

Winston.

He beat my wife.

He beat my fucking wife.

Black dots dance around the edges of my vision. I’m aware, barely, that my fingers don’t just hold Aurora anymore. I’m bruising her.

“Who was she?” she whispers, not flinching at the change in me. I’m about to detonate, and this beautiful creature stays. “He wouldn’t say anything. You’re shutting me out, all of you.”

My life has been flipped upside down over the last two weeks.

Hate has blended with lust. Guilt has been polluting my soul.

My heart has started beating all over again.

I don’t have the faintest idea of what to do with myself.

Only one thing’s stayed the same. My unwillingness to share my secrets.

The picture goes into my jacket pocket.

My past, for now, is behind me.

My present is right here.

With the woman whose cheeks I’m cupping.

“Please, tell me who she was. Winston said *was*.”

One shake of my head, then my lips are on hers. This kiss isn't meant to hurt Aurora or dominate her. I'm gentle and desperate. Searching and sure.

I'm relieved when she doesn't fight me. When she feels how much I need her, she grants me access to her mouth, parting her lips. Rubbing her tongue along mine.

She gives me even more by grinding her sex over my cock. Her moans are delicate compared to my feral groans.

I tug on her hair, my lips trailing a path over the exposed parts of her neck.

Pleasure blinds me as she rocks harder on top of me, my name on her lips.

Fucking her will be so easy. Quick, rough, and hard.

Fucking her will have to wait.

I've wasted too much time here already.

"No." Aurora grasps for me when I deposit her on the bed. She watches me as I adjust my cock in my pants.

Her eyebrows scrunch when I remove the collar from her neck.

I need it there, now more than ever. I also need her to rest. To take care of herself. She's been through a lot.

"Take a long bath. I'll be back soon. Then you're going to be punished for running away from me. The right kind of punishment. By the right person." I'm at the door, the key to it in my hand. I don't miss her grateful, soft smile that breaks something inside me. "Your husband."

The door is locked.

My way of keeping her safe. Always.

THE LAST TIME I was alone in a room with Winston was years ago. When we were young. Really young.

His only living parent, his father, was ill. His mom had died of TS complications a few months before that.

We, the kids of the Royalty families, were expected to take turns at the hospital.

He and I barely exchanged a word.

Soon after, he turned into my enemy.

For over two decades, I've waited for the right time to strike. Sat on the sidelines. Watched him live the life no member of my family could ever have.

He's ended up richer than his parents. Has a beautiful wife. The perfect daughter.

The three people I loved the most were rotting in their graves.

And now Aurora walked home with dust on her crumpled clothes. Her hair was disheveled.

The bruise on her cheek.

Because of him.

The memory twists my gut. Blazes through me over and over and fucking over.

I'm not leaving here until I'm done with him.

"Look what the cat dragged in." The smug bastard grins at me from his doorway. So sure of himself that he let me in through the gates. And now he's beckoning me into his home. "My son-in-law. Too bad Molly went out shopping. She's been at it for hours."

Hours that Aurora spent walking home alone, wandering the streets she barely knows, and somehow managing to find her way home.

While she was broken. Wounded.

Thinking I'd abandoned her.

I don't bother answering him. I stalk across the driveway. Climb the steps to his porch.

"Winston." My hand curls tight at my side.

On the drive here, I pictured him hitting Aurora. Imagined the taste of her fear on my tongue.

Those thoughts fueled me.

Pushed the rage straight into my veins.

That same fury is what sends my fist right into his jaw.

He laughs, the sound harsh. Cutting, despite his weaker position on the floor. "I see your wife has been influencing you."

My shoe meets his abdomen in the soft area beneath the ribs.

"How's married life treating you, by the way?" His grin is wide and mirthless as he sits up, coughing. Droplets of blood paint his lips red.

I should be concerned that he doesn't put up a fight. That he *lets* me go at him.

He could press charges. I could lose everything.

And yet.

Aurora, bruised. The way she cried in my arms.

I was desperate, Everett. I'm sorry. I just wanted to fix us.

Since I failed her, she went to him for answers. To find a way to reconnect with *me*.

So no, I don't care what he has planned. No one would put me away for this, anyway.

"Such a big man, aren't you, Winston?" I grab the collar of his shirt and bend toward him until we're face-to-face. "Assaulting girls half your size?" Since I don't want him suspecting my revenge plan, I add, "Your own daughter?"

"No idea what you're talking about." The twinkle in his eyes sets me off.

Bam.

This blow lands on his chest. Another coughing fit starts.

I stay exactly where I am, relishing the stench. The pain.

His helplessness is a balm to my wounded soul.

"Your reign of terror is over." I snarl, my chest heaving. "This was the last goddamn time you've had your hands on another person. On someone I care deeply for."

"She was begging for it."

Lotus.

Aurora.

Whoever else he might've violated or injured.

"Next time Aurora shows up here you don't so much as look at her."

When he smiles, I'm right there. Crumpling the collar of his shirt in my hand, tighter this time. Choking him.

He's wheezing, his face turning red.

"You don't talk to her."

The lack of oxygen finally elicits a reaction from him. His hands wrap around mine, prying me off him.

Trying to.

The madness coursing through my veins has turned me into a beast. I'll release him when it suits me, not a second before.

"Mr. Clarke," a woman from their staff shrieks.

She doesn't deserve my wrath. She's having it anyway. "Get the fuck out of here."

Her heels clack away, leaving me alone with purple-faced Winston.

"Stop," he begs, still coughing.

"And you definitely"—I growl, punching him one last time in the gut —"don't touch my fucking wife."

With that, I leave him crumpled on the floor. I stand up straight, smoothing my clothes.

"This"—he coughs violently at my back—"isn't over, Alder."

"I'm counting on it," I say to the night air.

I'll be seeing him soon.

Just a few more weeks.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

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AURORA

Punishments can take on many forms.

Corporal. Emotional. Sexual.

The first two types, I suffered under my parents' hands. Most days, it would be simply because I was alive.

Everett's punishments are different.

Since he claimed me as his, he's been isolating me. Put a butt plug in me. A collar around my neck.

He's fucked my pussy and my throat over and over.

There have been plenty of moments when he's also been cold, detached.

The man thrives on my tears.

He knows what's best for me.

And me, I've learned to expect him. I cherish this intense, unhinged man.

I look forward to his punishments.

Specifically, the one he promised me before he left. It sounded like a punishment I would love. A punishment that would ground me after this long, harrowing day.

Not because of the sinister tone laced in his voice when he said it.

It was what came before that.

I care about you.

I missed you.

I can't stop wanting you.

I was wrong.

Though…he said those things a while ago, before he left. He hasn't been back since.

I know he'll be back, physically and emotionally. He won't ignore me again like he did over the past week.

The *when* is what's eating at me.

I pace the floor of our bedroom, arms hugging my waist.

I'm swallowed up in Everett's T-shirt, enveloped by the scent of him. Of his soap that I used to wash myself.

The desire to belong not just to anyone, but to him, is wild.

My heart beats for him. My body feels incomplete when he's gone.

A part of me is missing.

Back and forth. Back and forth. I've worn a path into the floor by now.

Impatience takes over, and I stalk over to the door. Doesn't matter that it's locked. I'll scream to be let out. I'll drive every one of his staff out of their minds until I'm freed to look for Everett.

My lips part.

I fill my lungs with air, ready to use them, and then the lock clicks.

Dumbfounded and painfully hopeful, I stare at the door handle.

The wise thing to do would be to step back. Wait for the person behind the door to push it in.

Fuck being wise. I launch at the handle and wrench the door open myself.

I had no idea how much I missed him until this moment. Everett's hand wraps around my throat, where my collar usually is.

"Wife."

I'm floating. I'm *feeling*. Everything. I feel everything at once. Every nerve ending comes to life beneath his touch.

I figured he'd be back, but now that he is, I can admit to myself that a small part of me feared he wouldn't. I've grown used to disappointment. To being unlovable.

Tears brim in my eyes, and I blink them away.

Everett is here.

With him in the same room, I can finally breathe. I can let myself want.

I want him. His hands. His mouth. His cock.

I want my husband. "You're back."

"I am." He steps forward, forcing me to retreat. His gaze is full of need. His lips have thinned into a fine line. "I told you I would."

The door closes behind him. His attention is on me the entire time, never leaving me as he prowls deeper into the room. I have no choice but to follow.

I don’t want another choice.

The desire to submit to him, to be his, I’m consumed by it. Can hardly breathe. Can hardly concentrate.

The room fades around us.

There’s only his presence, his heat.

A storm of emotions batter my ribs. Love, hatred, lust.

Betrayal, though, it isn’t there.

“Yes, you did.” He’s keeping secrets from me, but he never lied. Not to me. “Husband.”

“You, on the other hand. You were too close to the door when I unlocked it.” His lips stretch into a deviant smirk when the backs of my legs meet the bed. “Where exactly did you think you were going?”

Chin dipped, I stare up at him and flutter my lashes. It always gets him hard, this shy look I’m giving him. “I was going to search for you.”

My knees buckle at the sound of his throaty groan. He kisses me, long and hard, before pulling back.

“You had your doubts. I understand.” With his free hand, he reaches beneath his shirt I’m wearing. He splays his hand on my stomach, where my skin prickles for him. It’s his way of showing me just how much he owns me. “You’ll see soon that …”

His fingers slide lower, beneath my panties. I grab his arm for balance when he pushes his middle finger into my pussy.

“Christ, you’re drenched.” His words are crude, his touch devoted. As he rubs me, I’m seeing stars, gasping for air. “Is that for me?”

“Yes,” I whimper, grinding on his finger. Trying to ride it like it’s his cock. I can’t stand how much I want it.

“Such a whore for your husband.” His face stays blank, but his fingers curl and stroke with intent.

He wants me.

“I am. You were saying that I’ll see something.” My voice is breath. Barely a sound. “See what?”

“You’ll see that you can count on me.” Everett pulls his finger out, using my wetness against me. Slow, gentle, circular caresses over my clit.

That tease of a touch isn't nearly enough. "That you can trust that I'll always be there for you."

"But you weren't." Though I have a sneaking suspicion, I still ask, "Where were you?"

Questioning him about anything is dangerous. He's in a mood. A dark, sensual one. He has my life in his literal hands, squeezing my throat without mercy.

I don't back down. "Why weren't you here, punishing me?"

"Another man laid his hands on you, Aurora." Black pushes out the gray of his eyes. "He hit you."

The fact that he says *another man* and not *your father* doesn't go unnoticed.

He gets it, I think. That though these monsters brought me up, I'm nothing like them.

He might've had doubts before. They aren't there anymore. Vanished.

I see it in his eyes. They aren't shuttered.

He's opened the blinds for me.

I've never felt this kind of all-consuming warmth in my life.

This is what *homecoming* means.

"And?" I press closer to him, aching for more. Begging for him, with my thighs clenched and my hands on his neck.

"No one touches my wife." One pull, and my panties are torn. Clutched in his large hand, where I can see them. "No one looks at you the wrong way and gets away with it."

My husband is a depraved, untethered man. He proves it by batting one of my hands off his neck and pressing my panties to his nose. Inhaling the scent of my pussy into his lungs.

"Now be a good fucking girl." The feral glare he gives me as he pockets my panties sends ice racing up my spine. "Take your punishment."

"I was already punished." I twist my head as much as his grip on my throat permits, giving him a closer view of my bruised cheek.

Begging him, in my own way, to take that pain away and replace it with his.

A low, ominous grumble reverberates in his chest. His nostrils flare.

He's possessive. More than he's ever been.

This is what I've needed. His anger wrapping around me like a warm blanket. A million shields.

His love, I’m swathed in it.

His hand around my throat isn’t there to hurt me.

All of Everett is here to love me.

“Aurora, why am *I* punishing you?” The speed and ease with which he rearranges his features are alarming. Hot one second, cold the next.

I truly am lost. Have no idea what to expect from him. I went looking for this. I don’t regret finding him.

“Tell me.”

“I stole your photo.” If I sound guilty, it’s because I am. And I’m hot. So hot. “And I got curious about the girl.”

“*He* might’ve punished you for your curiosity. I would never.” Everett’s thumb is demanding as it rubs my throat. His fingers are ruthless as he shoves them into my sex, all three of them at once. “Our library room rule? It doesn’t apply to you anymore.”

He’s stretching me. Making me squirm in pain. I don’t care about his words as much as I care about surviving this sting, the pressure that’s building inside of me.

“Enough, please.”

“Keep it up, princess.” A fourth finger follows. He’s pushing me past my limit, as desperate for me as I am for him. “Keep being in denial while you’re wet for me. While you take my hand like the good wife you are. I fucking love it.”

I cry with relief. From the effect his degrading words have on my heart. How he makes everything better by being ruthless and mean.

I growl, “I don’t like this at all,” so he’ll hurt me some more.

Hunger flashes in his eyes when he sees how I’m into him and his dirty games.

“Your cunt is sucking me in, begging for more, and this is what you have to say to me?” He thrusts his fingers deeper, harder. “I would’ve punished you for it…except hearing *I hate you* from your lips is such a turn on. So go on. Tell me you hate me again. Let me hear that filthy lie from my filthy wife.”

“I hate it. I hate you,” I lie, even when my nipples graze the soft fabric of my shirt. My collar is off my throat, but electricity pulses through me anyway because of how much I’m into this. “I do.”

What I get from him is a mocking scoff.

And a thumb on my clit, stroking me.

He drags his fingers over that—*fuck, fuck, fuck*—spot inside me, and I explode. Pleasure takes root at the base of my spine, shooting up to the back of my neck. My toes curl. Legs weak.

My hands seek his chest. His comfort. His strength.

In his silence, in his presence, he offers it to me.

His strength and himself.

"Good girl." Everett's wringing every wave of this orgasm out of me. "That's my girl."

He doesn't let up, and oh—oh, heat builds up in me again. I'm more than leaning on him. I'm holding on to him.

But I'm not the only one.

His possessive grip on my throat. On my heart. Everett is holding on to me just as much.

"Aurora." At the sharp command, my gaze snaps to him. "I was wrong about everything, princess."

He squeezes my throat tighter.

The lack of air, his expert fingers, Everett himself.

I've died and gone to heaven.

In his twisted, fierce way, he loves me.

The revelation sends me into another powerful, painful orgasm. I come so hard my vision blurs around the edges.

"Now that you know all of this, tell me, why am I punishing you?" His voice calls me back from the depths. "Answer me."

He doesn't stop stroking me even though I came. Twice.

It's taken me too long. Too fucking long to see that these orgasms are the punishment he's been talking about.

He's torturing me by rubbing my swollen parts. Circling my clit, where I'm the most sensitive. Where his touch both hurts and lifts me higher.

I'm overstimulated. Weak. I need him inside me. I need him to stop forcing these orgasms on me. "Please."

This vicious, awful man shakes his head.

"I can't talk like this. Can't answer." As my pussy clenches around him again, I curl my fingers into his lapels.

My traitorous hips roll into him even though I crave a break. A break or his cock.

This is too much. "Maybe if you gave me a chance to breathe—"

“I’ll tell you why.” He loosens his grip on my throat. Fresh air crashes in. Arousal too.

Everett narrows his eyes as my body clamps down on him.

This next orgasm has my head spinning. I cry out in pain. I reach up to Everett’s harsh, gorgeous face.

I look at him through my teary eyes.

Really look at him.

And what I see are the cracks he can no longer hide from me. They’re just as beautiful as the perfect, guarded version of my Everett.

We stare at each other when he’s giving me the punishment I *need*, not *want*. That doing this—tending to me—is the only reason he isn’t splitting my pussy in half right now.

“Wife. Stay with me.” I’m being laid out on the bed. His large body settles between my spread legs as his dark, comforting shadow casts over me. His fingers are as insistent as ever in my pussy. “Here’s why you’re being punished. Here’s the truth of it, why I’m forcing pain on you. You”—a low moan escapes him—“you scared the living shit out of me today. I thought I lost you.”

His voice betrays his fear. His worry for me bleeds from him, reaching inside my chest. Twisting my heart. Making it his own.

Finally. Finally. The walls he’s built around himself come crashing down.

If I hadn’t been crying already, I would’ve started now.

I’ve never come alive for anyone. Never let myself truly unravel. I’m bare, raw, and open, and it’s all for him.

I come apart for him, climaxing on his hand, calling out his name. Begging him to *please*, *please*, *please*, *fuck me.*

“Don’t you ever do that to me.”

This is the first time anyone’s ever said that to me.

I weep from the intensity of the fourth orgasm. I sob at his devotion. At the words I never thought I’d hear from him.

“You need something, you come to me.” It’s more than an order, it’s a promise. A vow that he’ll never let me down again. “No matter what. Me. Don’t run away. Don’t leave me.”

I’m too choked up to bring it up again, how emotionally unavailable he’s been. How I’ve been waiting for him.

What for? Everett knows. He carries the guilt for it.

This is his sick and twisted penance.

“Even when I’m cold and fucked up. When I’m busy. When I work.”

My shirt is shoved up, exposing me. His lips latch onto my nipple, sucking the hardened peak. Biting it while he’s ramming his fingers into my pussy.

“Even then. I’m your husband.” He raises his head, eyes thunderous. “Your everything. No one else gets to take care of you. Are we clear?”

I’d say yes, except my orgasm steals my voice. My ability to speak.

A nod is the one thing I’m capable of.

Everett smirks, rubbing my clit over and over.

“S-s-stop,” I manage to murmur. “Stop touching me. It hurts.”

He won’t. Of course he won’t.

While he finger-fucks me, my hands cling to his scruff, then to his cheeks. Everett lets go of my throat and pulls something out of his pocket.

Slams it onto the bed next to me.

I’m too lost in his gaze to care about anything.

“Before you take more of your punishment.” He pauses mid-sentence, slanting his lips on mine, kissing me like the brutal man he is.

What little air and sanity I’ve had left, Everett robs it from me. It’s his.

I don’t want to come again. I don’t, I don’t, I don’t.

“Before that.”

I squirm beneath his ruthless ministrations. There’s nowhere for me to run except toward him.

“You’ll accept my apology.”

“What?” My millionth orgasm is tearing me apart from the inside. “What apology?”

“This apology.”

He pries my hand open and presses a plastic item into my palm.

The remote.

His remote.

My foggy brain slowly connects the dots.

This apology, this is his real gift to me.

“Everett?” I’m able to say now that he’s on his knees, that his fingers aren’t inside me.

Wordlessly, he sheds his jacket. He tosses it to the floor. His hands are deft as he unbuckles his belt. Lowers his fly.

I marvel at the power rippling from him. His broad shoulders. The intimidating outline of his erection.

His attention is centered solely on me. As if I'm the only person in his world.

It's a heady feeling. I'm floating so high, I might never come back down. I might never stop clenching around air, even though I can't take another orgasm.

The tip of his cock leaks, precum wetting it as Everett strokes himself. My tongue darts out, hungry for a taste.

"Words aren't going to cut it." Lust turns to shock when he reaches for my collar. He's picked it off the bed and is pressing it against his throat. "Zap me."

He meant it when he handed me the remote. He wants me to use it…on him.

"No." I flex my hand, removing my fingers from the remote.

"No?"

"My collar. My punishments." I won't touch a single button.

A growl. "Territorial little thing."

He's right, but there's more to it than just my possessiveness. My family and I deserve what he's doing to us.

He was hurt. He must've been.

I won't punish him for getting even. Winston is probably the one who'd wronged him. It couldn't have been me. But someone has to pay for my dad's crimes.

I'll do it. It'll be an honor to give Everett the closure he needs.

After that, we can start over. Better. Stronger.

Together.

"I am," I snap. "Give it back."

My hand, he's closed it around the remote.

"Not tonight, you aren't." Under the pressure of his fist, Everett doesn't leave me much of a choice.

"I don't accept your apology." I need to distract him. Need to feel him.

He's stronger, overpowering me. Only thing I can do is arch my back, pressing my body to his.

The slightest brush of his cock against my pussy has me buckling.

"Obey, Aurora," he says, breath ragged. "Use it against me."

His hips roll, slow and deliberate. His thick, throbbing length teases me in the cruelest way.

“I won’t.” I can’t tear my eyes away from him. “Not like this.”

“Let me have it.” He guides my thumb to one of the remote buttons, and the rest of him stops moving.

“You’ve had your reasons.”

“That’s no excuse.” Hearing him say that curves his lips down. My soul aches, knowing that I’m right. That he’s been in so much pain. “Press the damn button, Aurora.”

“No, you…” I let out a shuddered breath, my chest aching like my ribs have cracked open. Like being consumed by Everett’s power has stripped me bare. “You saved me. *You. Saved. Me.* I could never hold that against you.”

“You paint me like I’m some decent man,” Everett growls, forehead grinding against mine, his pulse hammering through his cock. “I tortured you. I’ll do it again. Not because I have to, but because it fucking thrills me. So tell me, do I sound decent to you?”

He tilts his hips, lining himself up to my pussy. He’s so hard that the head slips right in.

The size of him, the stretch, I won’t ever get used to him.

“Someone hurt you first.” My lungs flatten at the invisible pain that’s denser than the air in the room. “Someone wronged you and I—I’m okay with paying the price for it. I’ll take it. Someone has to.”

“Shut up.”

One shove and he’s fully seated inside me. Bottoming out. So deep, I feel him everywhere.

I need more. So much more, as I pull him down by his neck.

Everett groans when my breasts graze his clothed chest. But he doesn’t submit to lust. He doesn’t submit to anyone, closing his fingers around mine, harder than before.

Forcing me to push the button.

“Oh, *fuck*.” His teeth gnash when I shock him.

Since our bodies are joined, a low current runs through me as well. My pussy clenches around him, my lust stronger than ever.

So is his. Everett rails me, fucking me through the pain.

“Aurora.” The veins of his throat bulge. His hot gaze is the epitome of satisfaction. I can feel every drag of his cock throughout my entire body.

“Say you forgive me.”

Talking is impossible. I’m being wrecked by the hottest man I’ve ever known—the most intimidating, the most commanding.

Even with electricity tearing through him, he takes it. Endures it.

He doesn’t have to, and I won’t let him. Enough is enough.

“I forgive you,” I moan, gasping. “I forgive you.”

“Thank you. God, thank you for forgiving me. Good girl.” The collar is gone. “That’s my good fucking girl.”

Driven insane with want, he drags my leg up, bends it hard at the knee, and throws my foot onto his shoulder. I’m spread helpless beneath him, made to take him deeper.

“You’re mine.”

I am. Every brutal thrust reminds me. Every inch of me belongs to him. I let him use me, let him shove his thumb into my mouth, dragging it in and out while he pounds me.

“Take my finger the way you take my cock,” he growls. “Make it wet.”

I’m drowning in him, not knowing where one ends and the other begins. Nevertheless, I obey him. I get spit on his thumb, licking it, sucking it in.

Over and over. I don’t stop. More. I want more of him.

“Greedy girl.” With a filthy pop, his thumb is out of my mouth.

A string of my saliva connects us, turning Everett into an animal. He growls. Fucks me into the bed. Finds my clit and rubs.

The cry I release is just as feral.

He ignores me, forcing another orgasm from my wrung-out body. His fingers dig into my raised thigh, burying into me. Marking me.

Showing his ownership of me.

“I hate you,” I lie again, teasing him, riling him up. I’m already high on the pain, floating and crashing simultaneously, and I want more. “I hate you.”

“Hate me, love me,” he grunts out, thickening inside me. “Makes no difference to me whatsoever.”

“Hate…” I’m swollen, wet, and stretched to my limit. And I don’t stop. “You.”

“You’ll come for me when I tell you to.” Everett rubs me through another torturous climax. “You’ll be mine forever because I said so.”

Apparently, my collar wasn’t thrown to the floor. My monster has it back in his hand. He’s pinning it to my abused clit. Ready to push me past

another limit as he reaches for the remote.

By sending currents of electricity to my clit, Everett claims me. Possesses me. Dominates me so completely that I could break down and never recover.

The pain of the past week—no, *the torment* of twenty-two years—is stripped off me. Burned clean. And for the first time, I can breathe.

One delicious zap at a time.

“Have no doubts, wife.” He delivers this vow with rough strokes. A vicious thrust. “By this time next year, you’ll have my babies. I’m fucking them into you, can you feel that? You’re squeezing me so well. Sucking me in. Begging for my cum.”

“I’m on”—my God, it’s hard to talk between orgasms and this low, insistent current that’s pulsing through me—“on the pill. I told you I am.”

Truth is, I was going to stop taking them this week. I couldn’t. Thinking that he’d change his mind about us terrified me. I couldn’t risk him knocking me up, then ripping my baby from me.

I regret it now. Painfully so.

A wicked smirk stretches over Everett’s lips.

“No”—*thrust*—“you aren’t.”

Shock and confusion settle into me. Everett takes them away by leaning in and kissing me. He absorbs the low hums of electricity with me, stealing my breath too. Owning all of me.

When he lets go of the remote and the collar, his hands are everywhere. One of them is around my throat. With the other, he’s rolling my nipple between his fingers. Pinching. Twisting until I’m coming again.

Until I’m raw.

Until I’m his.

I’m hazy. Delirious. I’m heady on endorphins and the ruthless pounding from my husband.

“Everett, what did you mean earlier, when you said I wasn’t on the pill?” I force myself to stay awake to ask him that while he sucks on my neck hard enough to bruise. “I’ve been taking them for years. I haven’t stopped.”

“I swapped them.”

My mouth drops open. Everett catches my bottom lip between his teeth, sucking it in. Biting me.

“I wanted to hurt you first. Now I just want you. With me. I’m obsessed with the idea of you being swollen with our child. And if you think this is a request, you’re dead wrong. You’re having my goddamn baby, like it or not. Our baby.”

Ours.

Babies I’ll get to love. What am I talking about? I already love them.

My chest tightens, a lump rising in my throat.

I already love their father too. “Yes, yes.”

What I’m agreeing to is wrong. It’s a dream come true.

We’re together in this. I’m not alone in the world anymore. We have a place to call our own. Where we can start a family.

“Good girl.” Everett reaches between us, sliding my collar up to my lips. “Now be a good fucking wife and lick it clean.”

The moment my tongue peeks out to do as he says, Everett’s cock pulses.

“Fuck. Oh, *fuck*.” His lust threatens to tear down the walls of our bedroom. “Gonna pump you full of cum. And you’re—dammit. Baby.”

I’m swiping my tongue over the collar when Everett pulls it away. He presses his lips to mine instead, tasting me, devouring my mouth. The groan reverberating from him is feral when he slams his hips into me the hardest, emptying himself inside me.

“Take it,” he rasps, his hips jerking as more cum spills from his throbbing cock. “Every last drop.”

I nod, clenching my thighs, trying to keep everything in.

After he’s done, his body stills. He cups my bruised cheek, holding me in place as his eyes search mine. Torment flickers there, the guilt that’s clawing at him.

Slowly, he starts to close off. Retreating into himself. I can feel him slipping into the dark place where he punishes himself.

I can’t let him. I need him here, with me. The way he needs me to anchor him. To remind him what matters.

“Please,” I whisper, leaning harder into his palm. “Stay with me. Please.”

“Aurora, how…” He shakes his head. “You see me.” The hollowness in my chest dissolves at the praise. His eyes slowly clear, and my heart races toward him. He rocks his hips into me, pushing his seed deeper into me. “You’re such a good girl.”

I’m melting. Right into the bed.

We have a lot to discuss. So many things to talk about. Only when both of us have settled.

There’s love in him, and I’m reveling in it.

For now, I rest in his arms. I let him carry me to the shower and lather soap over my body. Shampoo on my hair.

There are promises in his gaze. In his voice. His touch.

For once in my miserable life, I’m not locked up in a room. A basement. Left stranded on a wealthy couple’s doorstep.

For once, someone wants to be with me.

For once, someone stays.

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EVERETT

The shape of Aurora's body beneath the covers is captivating.

She's lying on her side, facing me, completely vulnerable. Eternally mine.

I can't look away. The rise of those luscious hips follows the dip of her waist.

The way the blanket rests on her ass, her legs, her calves.

Every inch of her skin pulls me deeper.

Pink nipples peek out from under the covers, begging to be bitten.

That untouched curve of her breasts, I have to taste them. Mark them.

Claim them.

She's gorgeous, from the inside out.

And…I'm infuriated. Not by her. Jealousy scalds my chest. How dare these covers touch what's mine.

Aurora silences the guilt, the hate, the rage…and fans the fire in everything else.

I'm hard. Frustrated. Hungry.

It feels wrong to crave anything but vengeance for my family.

But here I am. My priorities have shifted, the cadence of my rotten heart twisting with hers.

Killing Winston isn't about my parents or my sister anymore. It's about the bruise marring Aurora's cheek.

My fist tightens. My shoulders tense.

Then I refocus on her.

Her softness, her beauty. Her soul.

That's what matters.

My existence is pointless without Aurora in it.

I learned that the hard way. When she ran away, first, then over the week that I'd been keeping my distance. When I didn't have the one thing I needed the most.

And she took me back. Demanded to have this fucked-up, emotionally damaged man.

With her smart mouth and fierce will, she weathered the storm of me. Stood tall, even after everything I put her through.

She fought for me.

Later, I'll go to hell and back for her. I'll slay her demons one by one.

Tonight, I'm overcome with the need to have *her*.

Unable to hold back anymore, I drape my arm over Aurora, pulling her to me.

Being in bed with her, naked in the dark, I'm clinging to this moment like a lifeline.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Aurora's hand reaches out to me in her sleep.

Her eyes remain closed while small, gentle fingertips brush the sharp edges of my jawline. Searching for me, almost.

I take a deeper look, and yes, she's asleep.

Her relaxed expression is unbearably sweet.

For one second. The next, her nose scrunches. Eyes squeeze. Her breasts rise and fall faster than before.

Is it me she's afraid of? God, I hope so. I hope to possess every part of her.

Always.

Time slips by as I watch her, every second feeding the obsession.

Her very existence shreds my patience into jagged, bloody pieces.

My lungs burn, raw and punctured with impatience.

In the dead of night, silence hangs heavy around my neck. A chain. A burden.

Aurora. I want her awake. Need it.

The longer I wait for her eyes to flutter open, the harder my temples throb.

And the darker my thoughts spiral. I don’t just want her awake, I want her speaking to me. I want every word, every secret, every mundane detail she’s ever held back. Everything I’ve been denied.

“Aurora.” My hand flattens on the curve of her spine, drawing her closer. “Wake up.”

Not close enough. My cock jerks when I grab the back of her thigh, hiking her leg on top of mine.

“This isn’t a request.” To drive my point home, I yank her so her pussy is pressed to my hard cock. “I’m ordering you to look at me. Talk to me.”

She flutters her eyes open, staring at me in the dark.

Profound, visceral pain is what I find in them.

Pain that my belt, hand, or collar didn’t put there.

The throbbing in my head transforms into something violent. Vicious.

Murderous.

“Talk to me.”

She tips her face up to get a better look at me. “Talk about what?”

“About whatever it is that’s bothering you. You have something to say, you say it.”

“Fine.” Her determined gaze is goddamn adorable. She sucks in a deep breath. Holds on to my cheek as if I could ever walk away from her. Not anymore. “Who was she?”

“She’s none of your concern.” I don’t mean to snap or glower at her. I don’t mean to resurrect this wall between us.

Aurora doesn’t see it that way, and it’s my fault. My ribs crack when she flinches at the change in me.

I wish I could give her what she needs to ease her mind.

I wish I didn’t feel so dirty, airing out my family’s secrets.

“I’m your wife.” Her breath trembles. “Your secrets are mine too. That’s why you keep pushing me away, isn’t it? Because of them. And…it’s more than that.” Her lashes flutter, her mouth pulling down. “My gut says I’m connected to you, your secrets. You have to tell me.”

My defenses snap into place, hard and instinctive. I’m no longer a man unraveling. I’m a sardonic bastard wrapped in spite and fear.

I know exactly what I must look like to her, just as I know what my hand feels like when it curls around her throat, firm and possessive.

“Cute.” I squeeze, needing her, hating that I do. “Pretending we’re equals. Daring to demand I open up instead of giving me what I want. What

I deserve.”

She screams when I crush my mouth to hers. It looks like a kiss, but it’s not. It’s sweeter, sharper.

This is war.

This is Aurora, strong, gorgeous, fierce. She bites my lip to draw blood. Her nails rake down my arm, desperate to mark me.

All it does is make me want her more.

I change the angle, taking her lip between my teeth as I do.

A groan slips out of her, rough with pain and need.

I kiss her harder, claiming her pain and body as mine.

She moans into my mouth, her hips grinding into me. And yet her small fist pounds against my chest.

She’s a contradiction in motion. She’s alive, and she’s mine.

When I pull back, it isn’t so she can catch her breath.

I need to see her. What I’ve done to her.

Her bright eyes breathe fire. A thin strip of blood on her bottom lip is the evidence of my brutality. Fuck me, I’ve never been this hard. This famished.

“I could kill you in your sleep for this,” she growls, punching me. “For hiding shit from me. No, I wouldn’t kill you. I couldn’t. What I could do is —is—”

“You could do what, princess?” Apparently, I’m not done being a bastard, not done fucking with her. “Steal my wallet?”

She gasps, slapping me across the face. My cheek stings.

I flip her over onto her back, holding her by her throat as tight as I can without choking her.

Every breath, every swallow, hums against my palm.

They’re mine.

“Fuck you.” Another slap. This one centers me. This one wakes me the fuck up. It brings me back to her, to the quivering chin. The pain rolling off her. “Fuck you. Fuck. You. Everett.”

Fuck me, indeed.

What was I thinking? Snapping at her like that? Once again, I let my past come between us.

“I’m sorry.” I release my hold on her throat by some, turning us back so we’re both facing one another again. “I’m sorry, Aurora.”

She’s taken aback by it. Doesn’t breathe a word.

Her eyes watch me, but it feels for all the world like she peels the flesh from my bones. She picks me apart with her gaze, her lips pinched. Brow furrowed.

I don't have to ask her what she finds there.

It's obvious.

I'm damaged goods. Undeserving of her.

Yes, she thought I was worthy before. This, though, this last outburst had to have been the last straw.

Whether I'm right or wrong, the outcome stays the same.

Aurora belongs to me. My property. My salvation. My penance.

I'll lock her up in this bedroom. If that's what it takes to keep her, that's exactly what I'll do.

Until she accepts my apology, I'll keep touching her.

Keep begging for her forgiveness.

By cupping her cheeks, I tell her, *I'll mend the broken pieces of you. I'll make you feel whole for the first time.*

By stroking her new bruise, I say, *I won't rest. You will smile. You will laugh. You will come back to me, even if it's just to call me a bastard before you spread your legs and let me in anyway.*

What actually comes out of my mouth is another, "I'm sorry."

Aurora's eyes flutter closed. I press my lips to each one. Her eyelids are hot, and it's not long before tears roll from them.

My heart twists. More apologies come out of me when I kiss and lick them off her pretty face.

"That's what secrets do, Everett." When she finally looks at me, a scowl pulls at her lips.

Not for the first time, I notice that she's way too serious for someone her age. Unfortunately, I've learned the hard way that pain doesn't discriminate. It just *is*.

"They mess you up." She doesn't stop. "They mess us up. I can't reach you when you shut me out like that, when you won't let me prove I'm not the person you've built up in your head. Without the truth, we don't stand a chance."

She's absolutely right.

I'm absolutely wrong.

But old habits die hard. Sturdy walls are nearly impossible to tear down. It takes time for them to crumble. Effort. Patience.

Staring into Aurora’s blue eyes, I search for a sign. Any sign that she’d at least give us another chance.

I get more than I bargained for.

Determination shines through her blue eyes.

Yes, she’ll do that for me. She’ll stay by my side because she wants to.

She’d rip me apart, piece by piece, and I’d welcome it.

Until that happens, I start by changing the subject altogether. Ask about something far more interesting than my crushing past.

The question I woke her up for. I have to know everything about her. “Why don’t you start by telling me about yourself?”

Seconds tick by. Seconds during which Aurora says nothing.

Maybe she’s considering my question. Maybe it’s the feeling of my thumb running smooth paths over her bruise that renders her silent.

Or maybe this is just her getting back at me for…

Well, for everything.

I wouldn’t blame her.

“Okay.” A few blinks, and the look in her eyes shifts. Softens. Despite the condemning evidence against me, Aurora’s inner court has ruled in my favor. “What would you like to know?”

The first question that comes to mind has my muscles tensing. Teeth gnashing.

My body readies itself to absorb her response. “Has Winston always been this way?”

Her breath hitches. Whatever memories I’ve evoked, they’re bad. I’ve dug a knife into scars that never really healed.

Yet she doesn’t cower, instead lifts her chin, her gaze fierce.

Her pain, her suffering, she owns them. She manipulates them in her favor. Uses them as fuel to stoke the fire within her.

She carries herself so beautifully. Another trait that’s been pulling me to her.

She’s regal. This woman who’s been holding herself together alone for too long.

That’s why running toward me, the big bad wolf, wasn’t a compromise.

I’m deplorable, cruel, and strong. I’ve also, unbeknownst to me, protected her. Sheltered her.

I’m the one who quiets the voices in her head. Who could never hate her.

She got that part right.

“Tell me.”

A soft sigh, and here she is. Instead of cursing me, she leans into my touch. Searching for the comfort of my palm.

She clears her throat. “He never punched me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

A knife through the chest, that’s what I feel like. I don’t want to hear the rest, but I have no other choice. I have to learn just how wrong I’ve been about her. I’m her husband.

Her burdens are mine.

“How has he been, then?”

Aurora disturbs her bottom lip. I run my thumb over the swollen flesh, soothing her.

I’m doing my best to be attentive. Patient.

But hiding my building fury won’t last.

“The worst, up until now, has been the basement.” A pause. “They’d lock me down there. For hours or days sometimes.”

The basement? Lock her up there?

For days?

My mind races, taking me to a place that isn’t this room.

In my head, I’m throwing myself into my car. Any of my vehicles. I’m speeding through the quiet streets of our neighborhood, crashing through the Clarkes’ gates.

My hands on their throats. Their corpses beneath me. I’d bring their bodies back here. Lay them at Aurora’s feet.

No. A quick death would be merciful.

Justice would be knowing they’re in pain for the rest of their lives.

Locking them up in prison would guarantee a lifetime of suffering, knowing that Aurora and I are thriving on the outside.

They’d agonize over it.

Like I have every time I laid eyes on Winston’s smug face.

“Most of the time…” Her voice lowers. She’s embarrassed. For being abused. What the fuck? “I was caged in my room.”

Aurora’s glistening eyes drive a stake through my heart.

“Caged?” My hand won’t leave her cheek, my fingers won’t stop apologizing with every stroke, every caress. “What about the Royalty meetings you went to? All those shopping trips?”

We both see my questions for what they are. I'm not calling her a liar.

They tricked me. I have to get to the bottom of this so they won't be able to do it ever again.

"The meetings were necessary for appearance's sake." The grin that stretches her lips is watery.

I lean in, pressing a kiss to her mouth. To her pain. Another promise to take the pain away from her.

"They brought me there to fool everyone," she continues. "Only once a year, so that we can look like a functional family. Anything more, and I could've gotten too comfortable around you and asked for help."

My eyebrows shoot down. My soul crushes beneath the weight of the truth.

I spent years resenting everyone for falling for Winston's act. For not seeing him for what he truly is—a violent rapist.

Turns out, the joke's been on me all along.

"I—"

"No," she scoffs. "Let me finish. You asked about the, um, shopping trips. I forced them to let me out, even though we all knew I was going to try to steal stuff. And I can already see it—you're about to bring up your lawyers, aren't you?"

"I swear to God, if they withheld this from me…"

She huffs a sad laugh. "They had no idea. I never told them I loved staying in jail overnight. The few months in prison were a vacation. Besides, my parents are influential and wealthy. No one would've believed me. Either that, or they would've ignored me. I did the best with what I had."

Tomorrow morning, every lawyer who's ever handled Aurora's cases, who's been to jail or their house to sit down with them—they're all getting thrown out of there. They're fucking lucky they won't get disbarred for not looking deeper into her case.

"How'd you do it?" It hurts to keep digging into this. I have no other choice. "How did they let you out?"

She tells me her gut-wrenching story, pain lacing her voice, tears glistening in her eyes.

She's stomping on my heart, killing me one painful word at a time.

Aurora isn't just innocent.

She's a victim.

A survivor.

With my lips on Aurora's forehead, I whisper, "I'm sorry."

"God, I was stupid, wasn't I?" Her pain slices into my soul. "To think that'd hurt them. *You* managed to do that, not me. A hurricane, that's what you are. I'm a mosquito at best."

It's my turn to laugh. "A mosquito?" I pull away without letting go of her face. I won't ever let go. "Aurora, you're a wildfire. A hellion. You've crawled under my skin, reaching parts of me that I closed off to the world long ago. You've gotten under theirs, that's for goddamn sure."

"You can't know that."

"I can't?"

Kissing her is unavoidable. I sink my teeth into her bottom lip, sucking her essence into me.

Breathless, I draw back, looking at her with fresh eyes. "While you were in prison, they hardly ever talked in the Royalty meetings. When they had to engage with anyone, it was pitiful. Short sentences. Clipped words. They did everything in their power to avoid uncomfortable conversations about you. A mosquito? You weren't born to be something as small as a mosquito. You could never be one."

The tears slip free at last, tracing wet streaks down her cheeks and soaking into my palm. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. And you know what? You don't have to fight them alone anymore."

I flip her so that her back is turned to me. A basic impulse inside me demands that I have her closer. So I mold her to the front of my body, my arm tight around her waist.

My face in her silky hair, breathing her in. "I'll make sure they pay for it. For everything."

"For her too?" She isn't prying, isn't demanding. Though she could do either, Aurora *asks*.

And since the question doesn't cut deep anymore, I can offer her an answer.

This one is simple. "For *them*."

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EVERETT

Aurora fell back asleep hours ago.

I can't be anywhere but here, lying at her side.

Can't do anything other than hold her, be a human shield that's wrapped around her.

My mind races. Has been racing from the moment Aurora told me about the abuse she'd endured.

With a few sentences, she turned my world upside down. Again.

Self-loathing grinds my teeth together. Doubt crawls under my skin.

Her much smaller hand rests on top of mine. She's at peace, this angel, her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

With my free hand, I drag her closer to me, needing to feel every inch of her. Needing her, period.

Dammit, how could I have been so wrong about her?

I mistook her silence and scornful looks for snobbery.

All of us had.

But *I* should've known better. Should've looked deeper into it.

Guilt squeezes my chest.

Seeking comfort, I bury my face deeper into Aurora's hair. An ounce of warmth seeps through my bones.

Warmth I don't deserve.

One I'm taking anyway.

Her essence. Her soft skin.

Her breasts that fit so well in my palms. I cup one of them, holding her and rolling her nipple between my fingers.

So. Fucking. Perfect.

My cock hardens, pressed between her ass cheeks.

I need more. To apply enough pressure to arouse it without waking her up.

My wife.

Even when I resented her and everything she stood for, I wanted her. My attraction to her is as alive as I am at this moment.

As feral. As carnal.

Stripped down to my baser instincts, I grind my hips into her.

I don't love her. Can't love anyone. But something has awakened inside me.

This thing that's beating in my chest. My heart.

I'm connected to her.

Her spirit. Her obedience. How she fights, then lets go.

She's my responsibility.

She's mine.

A groan reverberates in my chest as I slide my hand down to cup her other breast. Massage her other nipple. It peaks from my touch. From the gentle grazing of my fingertips.

She doesn't have to be awake to drive me out of my mind. I'm already gone. I'm the sick fuck who gets hard just from watching her while she sleeps.

The obsessed man who can't help but touch her.

I spit on my hand, rub it on my cock, and line myself up to her cunt. A slight tilt of my hips, of adjusting my throbbing length, and the head slides in.

"Oh, fuck," I breathe out.

She's tight and hot, taking the tip of my cock so fucking well.

I change an angle, spit on my hand again, and lube myself.

This time, I don't hold back. I flatten a hand over her stomach and slam into her.

At the forceful invasion, Aurora gasps, "Everett."

She might tell me to stop. She could ask me to leave her alone, let her sleep.

I don't have it in me to give her either.

With my other arm between her and the pillow, I cover her mouth. Twist her face to me while I ram into her with every brutal thrust.

I'm a beast, obsessed with possessing her.

With breeding my woman.

Her hot breath tickles the inside of my palm. Her wide eyes are drowning in black, the blue of her irises swallowed whole.

Despite that, she's wet, hot. Spasming around me.

I want her just as badly, if not more.

Definitely more.

"Shh." Ignoring her accusing glare, I press down on her stomach, fucking her like it's the last time I'll ever get to do that.

"You belong to me now, remember?" I say. She squeezes me every time I drive into her.

"You don't get to tell me no. Much less when you're soaking my cock like that. When you're sucking me in."

She whimpers, and the shock of being woken with my dick buried inside her fades from her expression. Her eyelashes flutter in that seductive way of hers, without meaning to. By being herself.

Aurora relaxes into my body, into my ruthless treatment of her.

No more denying me. No more screaming into my palm.

She lets me use her. She wants it.

"My needy wife." I bite her shoulder, sucking on her skin. "Desperate to be fucked."

Licking the place I marked her is a ruse. Any type of reprieve or kindness will have to wait.

"Hmm." Her moan, the vibration on my hand, reaches straight to my balls.

"Desperate to be railed until you're boneless." I trail my hand down her stomach, stopping my fingers just over her pussy. "To come"—*thrust*, and fuck, I love stuffing her with my fat cock—"over and over and over again."

Her pleading gaze is as intoxicating as her resistance.

"Such a good girl." When I start rubbing her clit, Aurora moans *no* into my palm. Too much pleasure and it turns to pain. "So sensitive, aren't you? Let's see, then, what if I do this…"

As I keep thrusting, I pinch her clit. Watch her eyes roll. Her body quiver.

More than anything, I *feel* her. Her pussy clenches as her back arches.

Aurora glows when she comes. Brilliant, fearless, undone.

She gives me everything.

And I'll never get enough. Not now. Not ever. I drive deeper, harder, demanding more with every thrust.

"Princess," I rasp, filth dripping from my mouth. "You trying to milk a baby out of me?"

Without pulling out, I flip her onto her stomach, turn her head to the side, and lift her hips. Going harder, deeper into her tight heat.

Her cries and senseless murmurs as I ram into her are my undoing.

"Is that why you're squeezing my cock like that?" *Slap*, my hand cracks on her round ass. "Tell me."

Every time I buck into her, her whimpers grow louder. I fucking love it. Being wrapped around her cunt. Around her cries of pleasure.

With her cheek pressed to the pillow, her feral gaze locks on mine. "Yes, that's why I-I milk you. God. Please."

That *yes*. That honest motherfucking *yes*.

She definitely means it.

Goddammit, *I* mean it.

"You want my babies, Aurora?" I drag my cock along her walls, my gaze dancing between my soaked cock and her face. "Work for it. Make yourself come." Driving all the way into her, that scream from her pretty mouth. *Fuck*. "Make that pussy beg me as pretty as you do."

It's a subtle movement, her hand sliding between her thighs.

It's the hottest thing—watching her stroke herself. That feeling of her fingers slipping, brushing over my cock while I fuck her.

"That's it. That's a good little cum slut."

She moans at the degrading name, pressing her ass up higher. Offering herself to me.

"But you're not there yet. Are you giving up? Are you asking me to come on your back?"

"No, no, please."

"You want my seed in that needy cunt?" My cock throbs inside her, the need to fill her every hole consuming me. I suck my thumb, make it wet before pushing it in and out of her asshole. "The pussy you've signed over to me?"

"Yes." A few more thrusts and Aurora unravels before me.

She breathes out my name, clenching and unclenching around my cock and thumb like the good girl she is.

“Good fucking girl.” She’s still coming as I praise her. As I shove her flat on the bed, my hand in her hair. My hips buck in a harsh, unrelenting rhythm that sends her into another orgasm. “Yes—Fuck, just like that. Baby. Gonna come inside you.”

Satisfied and fucking crazy about her, I lean over to her parted lips, crashing mine to hers. We’re heat and desperation. Tongues, teeth. Our souls are joined.

Thrust after thrust, I give her what I promised I would. My cum.

My seed.

All.

Of.

Me.

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30

AURORA

Life has been…weird.

Not as strange as being here, at one of the Royalty's meetings tonight. With my husband at my side.

With his hand on the small of my back. While my parents' eyes shoot daggers at us from across the room, with Winston's jaw purple thanks to my husband.

But, yeah. Weird.

Very.

It's been days since Everett's confession. Since he said he cared. About me. The woman he seemed to despise for no apparent reason.

I got under his skin.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach when I heard him say those words. When I saw how honest he'd been. Fireworks exploded before my eyes.

I shouldn't have wished for that. His attention. His affection. This confession.

When someone blackmails you, kidnaps you, or forces you to do anything, the logical reaction is to hate them.

Which I did. I hated Everett for a little while. I feared him, mostly.

In the present moment, I'm addicted to him. Attracted to him. Mesmerized by him.

He's been healing me one day at a time. So much so that when I volunteer at the hospital, I can cuddle the babies without shedding a single tear.

Whenever I start freaking out with them in my arms, I remember how Everett holds me every night.

How he loves me.

His attention drags me out of the dark.

The pain, the tears, being degraded and ignored—I'd do it all over again, just so I could be his.

"You okay?" His voice is rich and soothing. Soft. But it's his power that eases my mind.

No one's come to greet us yet, but when they do, I won't be scared. No one can hurt me when he's around.

Not Stafford's dad and brothers, who are in deep conversation with Lina Bernard.

Neither can Ivy, Lina's daughter, who murmurs something to her father. Her husband, Tanner, doesn't look our way either.

Stafford isn't a threat, Everett reassured me back home. My husband's only friend nods absentmindedly at his mom, Susanna. She keeps stealing glances at us, then at my parents.

"Better than okay." I shoot a smile up at him. My smile grows wider still when I see his eyes flicker to my black elegant gown, to my high heels. His appreciative glance drives me wild. "I'm doing great. Why wouldn't I?"

That's the truth. The people who treated me as a prisoner throughout my entire life are at a safe distance.

Everett's presence is protective enough. It's everything I need.

He's all I'll ever need. His devotion. His total control over me. Everything he does grounds me. The weight of his collar around my neck and his rings around my finger too.

I'm owned, yet I've never felt so free. Ever.

He still hasn't opened up to me. And for him, I'm being patient. We'll talk when he's ready.

Besides, actions speak louder than words. And around me, at home, Everett's screaming.

As soon as he's back home from work, he won't leave my side. He comes looking for me.

I still crawl to him. He still gets so hard for it. Only difference is, he doesn't ignore me.

He spoils me rotten. Feeds me and passes my drink from his mouth to mine. Every morning and evening without fail. While I kneel between his

spread legs.

Then he slams into me in the middle of the night.

At the rising memories, a shiver runs through me. My thighs clench and I groan at how good the butt plug feels.

“Well…” The corners of his gray eyes crinkle. His lips curve into a small smirk when heat races up my cheeks.

“Well?” I blush harder, because fuck. It pleases me to please him.

“I asked because this is the first time you’ve attended as my wife. Everyone’s curious. They were staring when we walked in.” Goosebumps prick my skin as his lips lower to my ear. His charcoal-tailored suit brushes against my arm, making me wish I could tear it off him. “I bet they’re whispering about us now. So. Tell me the truth. Are you bothered by any of it?”

“By them?” I twist my head so my cheek rests against Everett’s shaved one. “Fuck. Them.”

The sound he makes at the back of his throat is low and growly. It says it’s the answer he needs from me.

More heat pools between my thighs. His possessiveness makes my head spin.

“Good girl,” he murmurs.

“Am I?”

He pulls away, but only a little. Enough to stay within reach. Enough for me to see him raise his hand, see his gold wedding band flickering in the dim light of the room.

My breath catches when he places a strong finger beneath my chin, tipping my face up to his.

He’s all sharp angles.

He’s both cruelty and beauty wrapped up in one.

He’s mine.

“Yes, you are.” His gaze darkens. “Though I’m not opposed to punishing you some more. Have a repeat of last night.”

Last night. When he put the collar on my clit, zapped and fucked me into so many orgasms that I blacked out.

When I woke up, my cheeks were tear-stained and my mouth was full with his cock. He wasn’t thrusting into me, no. My husband, who takes and tortures, put his dick in my mouth for the sole purpose of calming me. Like he did on our wedding night.

His plan worked. I draped my arm over his legs and drifted off.

Just like that.

“What a filthy little wife I have.” His thumb grazes my jaw, moving slowly and deliberately. “You’re replaying it in your head, aren’t you?”

I gulp. My knees threaten to give in. “I am.”

Awareness prickles over me, ruining the moment we shared.

I scan the room. These people aren’t sneaking glances anymore, nor do they ignore us. They blatantly stare. They watch as Everett leans into me, his mouth a hairbreadth from mine.

If he notices their attention is on us, he’s doing a great job at hiding it. “Patience.”

“Actually.” My lips feel dry. I lick them, gathering the courage to ask for this one thing he won’t give me on his own. What I thought I could wait for. “Since you’re in a generous mood…”

The way he huffs a laugh, the sheer joy from having me in his life, it twists my heart.

Why can’t he always be like this?

Carefree. Unguarded.

I love him when he’s scowling and cruel. Except I’m not selfish when it comes to him. I wish him a heartache-free life, even if it means that I’ll live a punishment-free one.

“Tell me,” he demands, his expression sobering.

“I want to, but…” Though no one’s standing close to us, it’s still possible that they’ll overhear me.

“But?”

“Okay, so…” I lower my voice. “Tonight, before we do all of *that*—”

“You mean, before we fuck?” Nothing has ever sounded viler, hotter, than the word *fuck* on his lips.

“Yes.” His eyes lock on my lips the second time I lick them. “Before that.”

I’m burning up by the time he looks into my eyes. My cheeks must be as red as my lipstick.

“I thought we could—we need to talk.”

“*We need to talk*.” He’s mocking me, furrowing his brow. “This isn’t some kind of romcom, princess. You don’t get to break up with me. I won’t give you a divorce. Never.”

“Uh, news flash.” I stand up straighter. He levels me with a wicked glare. “I’m a free woman. I don’t want a divorce, but nothing’s stopping me from getting one if I did.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“It is.”

“Keep it up.” Spankings. Electro play. Orgasm denial. These punishments are there, in the tone of his voice. In the tilt of his head. “Try me, and see where it gets you.”

Suppressing a moan is a struggle. The inside of my cheek burns from biting it so hard.

Good thing no one sees my peaked nipples. My ruined panties.

As soon as I catch my breath, I whisper, “You’re the worst.”

“You flatter me.” He smirks, tightening his grip on my chin. “Especially since you’ve barely had a taste of what I’m capable of.”

Someone’s walking toward us. I can’t tell who he is—can’t look anywhere but Everett’s handsome face. I sense him though. Hear the sound of a man’s shoes on marble floors.

“I said I don’t want a divorce,” I blurt out. “I want to talk. That’s what I’m asking for. You’ve been mostly quiet, which is fine. I get it. You have secrets. We don’t know each other all that well. Thing is—”

“Everett.” Although I haven’t attended these meetings often, I recognize the voice.

Stafford Hale.

“Please.” As challenging as it is in these heels, I rise higher while pulling on Everett’s jacket. My lips find his ear to continue this important, private conversation. I’d wait longer for him, but I feel like we’re almost there, like he wants me to push it. “We have to start somewhere. Zap me, hurt me, call me a slut. But for fuck’s sake, talk to me.”

Stafford clears his throat. I could punch him right now.

“We’ll talk at home.” Everett trails his hand lower, squeezing my throat. A show of power to the rest. Of his dominance. “Be good. Don’t leave my side.”

“Yes, master.”

My mocking tone gets me what I was aiming for. A tighter squeeze and Everett’s low growl.

“Be. Good.” He rests both hands on my shoulders, putting some distance between us. Then he turns to his only friend. “Stafford.”

“Hey.” Green eyes glimmer as he looks at Everett and me. Stafford runs his hand through his short red hair. It’s as immaculate as his light gray suit. “I see you two are in the middle of something. I just came here to say hello to the newlyweds.”

Everett’s lips pinch into a tight line. “You can stay.”

I watch as the two launch into a conversation about work, the stock markets, clients, and any other clandestine matters.

While they talk, I start wondering.

Stafford clearly isn’t upset about what Everett’s done. About his friend forcing this marriage on me. He smiles at my husband.

He understands him. I can tell.

He must know how much pain Everett’s been through. He must agree that Everett is entitled to such ruthless revenge. Or he didn’t like the idea, but Everett told him we’re on good terms now.

If it’s the first option, then whatever happened to Everett must’ve been devastating. More than I could ever imagine.

Lead lines the bottom of my stomach. Guilt threatens to swallow me whole.

Everett senses it, placing his hand on the small of my back. Same as before.

Except now I’m far less floaty. I’m being weighed down. Pain and confusion slice through me.

I need…

I need…

“Hey, you.” A finger taps my shoulder. I turn to the source of the voice.

Ivy.

Her sapphire-blue eyes look down at me curiously. They’re highlighted by her pearl-colored dress and her platinum-blonde hair. The color is so bright that she must’ve been in the salon today or yesterday at the latest.

Everett’s hand finds my waist in record speed, hauling me to him. “Leave her.”

“Ooh, possessive, that one.” She winks, the gesture patronizing. “Don’t worry. I want to grab a drink with your new wife, that’s it. Promise I won’t bite.”

Of course she won’t. I’d claw her eyes out if she tried. Two stints in prison and a dozen nights in jail, then living with Everett have made a fighter out of me.

“Leave. Her,” Everett repeats.

Unlike him, I don’t want her to leave.

For the first time ever, I’m allowed to really talk to these people.

Someone actually takes an interest in me, and she might give me the key to help Everett with his revenge. He’d be so proud of me when I return with information. Any information about this group would be helpful, right?

“I’m okay.” I cover Everett’s hand, rubbing his much larger one with my palm. “I’ll be right back. Promise.”

Clouds gather in his eyes. His silence stretches, thick and ominous. The entire room holds its breath, waiting for him to speak.

Needing his approval doesn’t embarrass me. On the contrary.

He’s my shield. A wall standing firm between me and the world. The gatekeeper of my safety, deciding who’s allowed in our little circle of two.

He’s keeping me safe.

That, on top of the pain and guilt that have plagued me, brings tears to my eyes. I interlace our fingers together, squeezing his. Silently reassuring him.

“Drinks. That’s it.” His shoulders tense, eyebrows dropping low. “I don’t want you leaving my sight. Not even for a second, understood?”

As if on cue, servers return to circulate hors d’oeuvres and champagne on silver platters. People murmur to each other.

Ivy’s “aww” is as cynical and antagonizing as everything about her.

Everett whips his head to her, glowering. “Shut up.”

With a shrug, she tells me, “Let’s go.”

She’s smiling, her grin wide and borderline unhinged. An identical grin to the ones I gave the mall security guards every time I got caught.

It has to be the reason I can’t bring myself to hate her fully like Everett seems to.

And while I don’t hate her, she’ll never be my friend. I don’t trust her one fucking bit.

“Sure.” I match her expression, hoping to fool her into believing we’re on the same team. “Everett, can I get you anything?”

His eyes widen in shock. His lips press into a thin line.

Oh God. I’ve offended the alpha male. The provider. The protector.

I won’t laugh. I won’t tell him he’s so fucking adorable.

Fuck, I think I love him.

“Gotcha.” One last squeeze of his hand, and I slide out of his grip. “I’ll be back soon, then.”

“I don’t want you leaving my sight,” he repeats, the threat in his voice laced with subtle yearning.

“I won’t.”

Ivy links her arm through mine and carries me toward the bar.

“So.” She leads me around the group of people, not giving any of them a chance to talk to me. “How’s married life? Are you happy?”

Strange. She and I have only ever said hello to one another, and yet here she is, acting like she’s my best friend.

I don’t let the suspicions get to me. That’s what I wanted, after all. Her trust.

“It’s been great,” I say, my smile faltering. I’m closer to my parents now than to Everett. This unwanted proximity evokes old fears.

I look over my shoulder to find my husband’s full attention on me. Shielding me from afar.

One dip of his chin, and safety wraps around me like a well-worn blanket.

Then Stafford continues talking to him about something, and Everett turns to him.

“I can tell.” While I’ve been searching for my human lifeboat, Ivy has unlinked our arms and ordered us two glasses of red wine. She slides mine into my hand, perching her elbow on the bar. “The kinkier, the better. Right?”

The skin beneath my collar bursts into flames. On its own, my hand rises to cover it from her leering eyes.

Too fast, my embarrassment turns into possessiveness. Into rage.

I’m not a prude, but she has no right to imagine my husband fucking me. I’m the only one who’s allowed to do that.

Only me.

“Mine,” I growl at her.

“Easy there, tiger.” She laughs, taking a sip of her wine. She dabs a paper napkin over her wet lips, adding, “Let’s start over. I wasn’t referring to the collar. I’m not trying to get Everett to collar me either.”

The idea alone evokes righteous fury within me.

I take a menacing step closer to her. “You can try. See how you like having your throat slit.”

The slightest suggestion that he could be stolen from me is unacceptable.

The need to drag information out of her is no more. Anger forces its way through, and I clench my fist, placing it on the bar. A demonstration of power.

"I meant *you*," she continues, undisturbed.

That gives me pause. Then I ask, "What about me?"

"You know…" Her eyebrows rise meaningfully. Her smile never leaves her lips. "Being passed around from one Daddy to another."

"Daddy?" My forehead creases.

Suggesting that Winston was a father to me is an insult to daddies everywhere.

"Yeah, someone to look after you." She's being rude as fuck, gesturing at me. Blabbering loudly. "While you can kick back and do basically nothing."

Listening to her, trying to get the information she won't give me—I have to focus on that.

Kind of hard when I'm fighting the urge to strangle her for mocking me.

When I lived at the Clarkes, I didn't *kick back*. I was a prisoner.

And Everett? She said she wasn't into him, but the more I think about it, the more I realize that calling someone Daddy is sexy. Really sexy.

She doesn't get to talk about him like that.

"Stop fantasizing about my husband," I snarl, a little too loudly.

"Not into him." While she talks, a man huffs behind me, closing in on us. "I was just saying that I see how a Daddy kink works for someone like you."

"I never…" I lean forward, putting my face in hers. I won't let anyone suggest that Winston was ever a father to me. That abuser. Fuck no. "…had a Daddy."

Her jaw drops at my tone.

Then she doesn't get to say a word. She gasps at the same time a familiar hand wraps around my arm.

My adoptive dad yanks at my arm hard. Hard enough to have me flying in the air and toward him.

"Aurora Coraline," he growls, face purple, nostrils flaring. "Are you ever going to stop being an embarrassment? Goddammit, you're just like her. Just like your mother."

My mother?

He can’t be talking about Molly. She’s the perfect society lady. Always has been, always will be. Winston said so himself, numerous times.

Just like her. Just like your mother.

He hissed it in his fit of violent anger. It was a slip-up.

He knows who my biological mother is.

He’s known her since before she became my mother.

The girl in the picture.

Has to be her.

Who. Was. She?

A lump forms in my throat. I’m past words. Past prying Winston’s hand off me.

I’m desperately trying to process what the hell is going on, simply staring at him.

“Prancing around, displaying your emotions like some trash who came from the street.” He isn’t hissing anymore. He’s the most furious he’s ever been, shouting and shaking me. “Where the hell are your manners? You can’t come in here, doing whatever the hell it is you—”

“The fuck she can.” Everett’s hand clamps around my father’s wrist.

My husband is seething. Veins bulging, body radiating heat and rage as he stands at my side.

“She can do whatever the fuck she wants. Anywhere. Anytime.” His voice drops, deadly. “Now do yourself a favor before I snap your wrist in two. Get your hand off my wife.”

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31

EVERETT

I've done a lot of fucked-up things in my life, but bringing Aurora here wasn't one of them.

It isn't about my revenge anymore. About humiliating her and her parents.

She's here because I want her here.

As my fucking wife.

As the woman I'm proud to call mine.

No one gets to hurt her.

Winston Clarke ruined the people I loved most. All three of them. He's already tried to break Aurora.

No more.

Whether he rots in prison or has maggots eat his decaying body, it doesn't matter.

He's done.

"You should be thanking me." He sneers, looking even uglier than before with that purple bruise on his jaw.

The one I put there.

"A favor?" Since he isn't letting go of her, I make good on my promise and twist his arm.

In the process, Aurora slides to the side until our arms brush. To her monster. Her protector. But she isn't whimpering. Isn't crying or showing any sign that he's gotten to her.

Her bravery has pride surging through my veins. I'm hard as a rock.

I can’t let it distract me.

He. Still. Has. Her. Arm. In. His. Grip.

“Yes, a favor, Everett.”

His bones feel like they’re about to crack. I can tell I’m close to causing him actual damage.

“I’m teaching your unruly wife how to behave. You’re obviously failing at the simple task.”

The attention of the entire room is set on the three of us. No one says a word. No one comes to Aurora’s or Winston’s rescue.

That’s fine.

Because the latter doesn’t deserve it. And the former? She’s being rescued by me.

I’m fueled by years of rage. I’m turning into a beast in this luxurious space with its upscale catering and so-called civilized folks. Digging my fingers into the fabric of his jacket.

“Let. Go.”

“Fine.” When he finally releases her, I free his disgusting wrist.

His gaze cuts to Aurora, then to me. I push her behind my back on instinct.

Winston gives me a conniving look that turns my blood hot. “Your funeral.”

His words, the shit-eating grin, they should worry me. I should demand answers, strip him of the advantage he thinks he has.

Right here. Right now.

In plain sight.

Except I don’t care. At this moment, Aurora matters. She clutches my hand tightly, rubbing her thumb on the inside of my wrist.

In my periphery, I can see her using her other hand to massage her arm where the bastard grabbed her.

Her pain makes me lose it altogether.

Let’s see how he likes it when he’s the one being manhandled.

I clamp my fingers around Winston’s arm. The loser flinches.

“Haven’t you done enough?” his wife whisper-shouts from behind him. “He let her go. Stop it, Everett.”

The menacing gesture of tilting my head shuts her the hell up. Her heels scrape the floor as she scrambles backward, her cheeks paling.

“Everett.” That’s Stafford. He’s at my side, his voice low. Appeasing.

Nothing but violence could soothe me now.

No, that's not accurate.

Violence *and* staking my claim over Aurora would soothe me.

Christ, I love how quiet she is. How she stays in place, trusting me to protect her.

Or maybe it was something Ivy said that silenced Aurora.

Either way, I need to be with her. Alone.

When I'm done with him.

"I warned you what would happen if you ever laid a hand on my wife again." Ignoring my friend, I shake Winston. His teeth clatter, his arm straining beneath my grip. He's not getting out of this one so easily. "Yet here you are, hurting her. Did I not make myself clear? Or are you that eager to answer for your crimes by letting me ruin you?"

Aurora gasps, her small fingers squeezing my much larger ones.

She's owed this. The humiliation I'm serving Winston with.

She deserves that and so much more. To be cared for. To be shielded.

To know what love is. For once in her life, she deserves that too.

Love.

The emotion feels new. Raw. Uncomfortable.

It's a sharp ache that spreads over my chest like poison.

Nothing's ever hurt like this. I haven't loved anyone as much as I love Aurora.

This love shapes me into a better man. It changes my priorities.

Loving her doesn't heal me. I'm afraid nothing ever will.

Love slams into me, and I embrace it.

And now I get to hurt the man who threatened that love.

"You're not the only powerful man in this city." Every word from Winston drips with hate. "You'll do well to remember that."

His threat is as meaningless as he is. Whatever he has in store for me, I'll deal with the fallout.

"Unlike you…" Resentment tastes bitter on my tongue. "I remember everything. *Everything*."

I can't bear this for a second longer. Touching and dealing with him.

All I want is to be balls deep inside her. I need to be wrapped up in her warmth, her goodness. Bury myself in her sweet cunt.

"Good," he says.

“Good.” I push him away, glowering at him as he scrambles to stay upright.

Molly rushes to help him, and he swats her hand off, murmuring some shit I don’t hear.

I’ve wounded their pride. Humiliated them.

A month ago, I would’ve basked in how pathetic they looked.

A month ago, I didn’t have Aurora. I didn’t have a fucking heart.

With one hand on the small of her back, I guide her to one of the exits from the main hall. The large archway leads into a hall of rooms designed as lounge areas.

This is where we hold private meetings with people from outside our secret society. Never during our bi-monthly Fridays. No one’s permitted into our circle on those days. We bring them here on any other day to make them feel special. Chosen. In this gaudy mansion on the outskirts of Boston, in our presence, they think they actually mean something to us.

They don’t.

Anyway. I don’t give a fuck about anyone else.

Aurora. I’m taking her where we can talk. Where I can sink into her sweet pussy behind closed doors.

They won’t see her.

Whether they hear her or not, that’s a different story entirely.

Let them. Let *everyone* know who Aurora belongs to.

“Everett, we need to talk.” She tries to stop me, planting her heels on the floor.

Not happening.

“Please. Winston said—”

“Nothing of importance.” Despite her best efforts, I’m stronger. I’m out of my mind with lust.

“Everett!”

“I said, whatever Winston said doesn’t matter. Not now.” I open the second door on the left, shove Aurora into the room, and follow her inside.

Her shock works in my favor. I use it to pin her back against the wall. To slam two hands on either side of her beautiful, confused face.

I level my face with hers. “You matter.”

“You do too. Out there, they said—”

Maybe I should hear her out. Maybe I don’t give a fuck.

Lifting a hand to her jaw, I tip her face up and claim her blabbering mouth. I kiss the words out of her. Lick the pain and doubts anyone's planted in her head.

My wife is brave, thinking she's resisting by grabbing my shirt.

The only thing her nails do is turn me right the fuck on.

When I bite her bottom lip, she lets out a throaty moan that has me throbbing. I grab her by the hip, thrusting her body to where I need her the most.

By pressing her to my aching cock, I get a sliver of the friction I've been desperate for.

It's nowhere near enough.

I fear nothing ever will be.

"More," she echoes my thoughts. My deepest, darkest desires. "Please, Everett."

Tonight is unlike all the nights that came before this one. I don't want predictable. I don't need a part of her that I've already claimed.

"Please, what? You want me to hear you out?" I push her face up higher, trailing soft kisses over the curve of her jaw. I roll my hips into her, slowly, gently.

Both of these light touches torture her. I hear it in her little huffs. Feel it in how she arches her back, pleading with me to go harder on her.

"Please."

"*Please*, explain to you what you heard out there?" I bend lower, licking one of her nipples through her dress.

"Yes, ye—" As soon as I pull back, as I cup her pussy possessively without giving her the pleasure she's dying to have, Aurora's eyes widen. "No. I'm sorry. Don't stop, don't—"

I can only deny her for so long. I bite her hardened nipple, my middle finger pushing through the fabric of her dress. The sound of her whimper swallows up her pleas.

"Hmm." One last lick to the tortured spot, and I rise to my full height.

She's disheveled and wild beneath me. This woman is mine. I own her.

I'm going to mark her everywhere.

"As I said, no one else matters." I rub her, slow enough to torture. "You do. You're all I see. With your pupils blown, with the way you gasp. You're begging to get fucked, and you care about them?"

Her thighs clench around me. I don’t think she has any idea that she’s riding my hand.

With her parents just outside the hall.

“You’re right, I am. I want you, Everett.”

Fuck, I’m dying over here.

“You’ll get your cock, brat.” Oh, will she ever. I can already hear her begging me to stop. “Turn around.”

This isn’t really a request. I fist her long, thick hair, spinning her to the wall.

We both let out a groan once I press her cheek to it. The depravity, the heat pulsing through us.

Better. So much better, having her lips on my palm. The swipe of her tongue along my hand has me thrusting hard into her.

“It’s the pain, isn’t it? You’re desperate for it, for your husband.” Every time I dry hump her, she moans louder. “I bet you’re soaked. That your pretty pussy is begging to be railed. To be split in half.”

Her eyes roll with pleasure for a second before they meet mine again.

Aurora is all mine.

And I’m hers.

“On second thought, no. I won’t be taking your cunt tonight.” My tongue runs over the top row of my teeth, my hand bunching the skirt of Aurora’s dress up her thighs. Her skin is smooth to the touch. Her whimpers are so fucking hot I can’t stand it. “I think you’re ready to have your ass fucked.”

I push my hand harder on her face, prepared for the scream I knew was coming. It reverberates onto my palm, lighting me up from the inside.

As I push her thong aside and run my thumb over her butt plug, she screams louder.

“No, no, no,” she murmurs, the sound muted by my hand.

She’s right to be scared. There’s no lube within reach. Days after I took her virginity, she still struggles when I pound into her pussy.

But she’s had her butt plug in her ass for a while now. And though I can’t stop, I’ll make it good for her. She comes first, always.

“Yes.” The butt plug can stay for the time being. It’s her thong that has to go, so I rip it off her.

“I’m going to let go of your mouth.” My eyebrows lower, a silent warning. “And you’ll be a good, silent girl for me. I don’t like sharing

what's mine, unless…"

Her fear turns to lust as she opens her eyes wide and spreads her legs, letting me slip a finger into her pussy. She's soaked. Dripping onto my hand, getting off on the promise of pain.

Other than marrying her, corrupting her was the best thing I've ever done. The most delicious.

"Unless you want your daddy and the whole group to hear us." This isn't about revenge. It's about being the filthy man who ruins her, about winding Aurora up until she can't think straight. "What a horny little wife I've got. Getting off on being her husband's fuck doll."

She nods frantically. She has no idea what she's agreeing to, and neither do I.

Not like it matters.

"No," is the first whisper to come out of her mouth after I remove my hand. A really fake, adorable fucking *no*. "Not there."

Both hands on her hips, I drag her back to me. She flattens her palms on the wall, tilting her ass up.

"Stop pretending"—my fingers lock around the butt plug again, twisting it to help ease it out of her—"you don't need me in every single hole, princess."

"I'm scared." Her ass clenches as real fear takes over. "Don't. Please." But she's spreading her shaky legs wider. Giving me all of her.

"Does it look like I care about what you want?" Once the plug is out, I throw it away. Aurora bites her bottom lip, but a low cry escapes her anyway. "Do I look like a caring, affectionate man to you?"

"You look like a bastard," she growls. "I hate you. How gorgeous you are. How I love it when you hurt me. Hate. It."

"Brat." The *crack* on her ass is the first out of ten.

Each of them is a gift. A thank you for wanting me despite everything I've put her through.

After both cheeks get the same amount of spanking, when both of them are red, only then do I stop.

"What about now?" I spread her ass and spit on her tight hole. No teasing, I drive two fingers inside her at once. Her moans make my cock jerk. "You like that? You want this bastard's fingers going deeper? You're grinding your hips to take more of me?"

“You won’t fit.” Aurora’s breath hitches as I spit on her again, lubing my fingers and her ass. “You can’t fit in there.”

“Nothing”—a third finger coaxes a feral groan out of her, and her huge eyes go even wider as she stares at me—“will stop me from getting what I want. It’ll fucking fit.”

I finger-fuck her ass, reaching forward to drag her arousal over her clit. I rub her until tears roll down her cheeks.

“You want me?” Her voice is desperate, imploring me to say yes.

She’s too sweet. Too delicate to belong to a man like me.

It doesn’t stop her from coming all over my fingers when I tell her, “There’s nothing I want more.”

Her thighs clench, her whole body trembling because of me. Because of the pleasure I force on her.

And I’m the sick fuck who gets hard from it.

My restraint shatters—I’m done waiting. I’ll lose my fucking mind if I’m not inside her. I slam back into her pussy first, using her slickness, her sweetness, the way she clenches and drenches me until I’m dripping. Until I’m ready.

Then I pull out, press the head to her ass, spit slicking her rim. Precum, spit, heat, I smear it in on her with the blunt tip of my cock.

“Relax.” My fingers roll her clit, relentless. “Let me in.”

Without another word, her second orgasm rips through her, softens her into something pliant, perfect. And fuck, yes—that’s it. The head breaks through her tightness, pushes inside.

The sound that tears from my chest isn’t human. It’s a growl, animal and starved.

“Good girl, take it, just an inch.” I stay true to my word, stopping there. I want her to get off on it as much as I do.

I slide my hand up her ribs, yanking down her dress to expose her tits.

“Such a good girl.”

At that, she unclenches her thighs, her body pleading for me to take more.

I go deeper into her ass, inch by inch, as I pinch and twist one nipple, then the other, the way she likes. “My perfect little hole.”

She’s all cries and incoherent mumbles.

She’s all mine.

“Princess, you’re so good.” Sliding my hand up her body, I wrap my fingers around her throat, smearing her arousal on her. “So.” Thrusting forward, I bottom out inside her. “Good. Good girl. Love being inside you.”

“I-I need to say something.” She’s panting, fucking perfect. “I—Thank you.”

I don’t deserve her gratitude.

I’m taking it, anyway. Fucking her hard and fast. Calling her *baby*. *Princess*. *My little slut*. *My wife*.

Every part of her is beautiful. Every part of her belongs to me.

And when she finds her release for the last time, I come so hard I almost black out.

“Aurora.” Still semi-hard, buried in her ass, I bend lower to hug her.

“You made it fit,” she whispers, covering my arms with hers.

“Yes, I did.” I let out a short laugh, kissing the sensitive area beneath her ear. “There’s something I need to tell you too.”

Aurora blinks, eyes focusing on me. “Okay?”

Time slows to a stop. So does my heart. *Deep breath*. “I love you.”

“Oh.” Her nose scrunches, a soft smile playing on her lips. “Good.”

“Good?” Out of everything she could’ve said. “You’re killing me over here.”

“Yes, good.” The feel of her hands on my forearms makes me pull her closer to my front. “Because, you sick fuck, I love you too.”

Then, as if she hasn’t just told me the words I’ve been praying to hear, Aurora’s eyelashes flutter, and she falls asleep in my arms.

Which is fine by me.

She needs the rest.

I, her monster, am here to take her home.

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AURORA

Before Everett forced me to marry him, I'd always wake up alone.

Whenever I had nightmares as a child, my parents refused to let me squeeze between them in their bed.

They made sure to stay away when I came down with the flu. One of the nannies would check on me every few hours while I stayed in my bed. By myself.

Sleepovers? With who? I had no friends.

An empty bed had been a constant in my life.

Some days, it was my safe haven. The longer I went without seeing or hearing from Molly and Winston, the better.

Then, I'd been ripped away from my lonely life. Everett made me his.

I've grown attached to his presence, his cock, his warm body beneath the sheets.

So it's no wonder that even with my eyes closed, I can sense when he's here.

And when he's gone.

His possessive arm isn't wrapped around me.

The blankets don't warm me nearly half as much as they usually do. It's as if ice clings to my bones.

I slide my hand over to the other side of the bed anyway.

I'm met with expensive, empty sheets. No sculpted abs. No hard chest.

No furiously beating heart.

I miss it.

Sigh.

My eyes flutter open. A few blinks and several moments later, they adjust to the darkness of the room.

It's still night out, the moonlight filtering through the large windows.

The light it's offering is offensive. Because when I turn to the other side of the bed, I see just how empty it is.

After Everett's *I love you* tonight, after how he claimed me in front of everyone, I'd hoped for…

I'm not sure what.

I'd hoped for *him*. And he isn't here.

"Well, guess what?" I proclaim to the empty room as I throw my feet off the bed. With my fists on my hips, I must look as determined as I feel. "I'm going to get him."

Once I've brushed my teeth and washed my face, I go to the door and open it.

Before I take a step out of the room, I let air filter into my lungs. Swallow around the lump in my throat. Rub my hand over my silly, hopeful heart.

Hope was what had kept me alive for over two decades. I could just tell that being the Clarkes' prisoner wasn't the end for me.

I lived in order to spite them and bide my time.

I was waiting for something better to come along.

Someone better.

Ironically, that someone is the stuff nightmares are made of, not dreams.

He doesn't scare me though. I'm strong enough to love him.

It'll be easier to do both once I unveil his secrets.

Ours.

That's it. I've decided he has to talk to me. We have to join forces.

He has to stop pushing me away.

Another deep breath in, and oxygen fills my lungs. I wipe my clammy hands on my black nightgown, which Everett must have put on me while I was out.

I smell nice too, so he must've showered me.

Time for me to return the favor. Time for me to take care of him, by letting him know he'll never be alone again.

On my way to the library—where I'm sure he's waiting for me—my footsteps are the only sound echoing in the ample space. I pass by the

impressive living room as I walk along the dimly lit hallway.

Then I reach the library's door, push it open, and step inside.

Sitting in one of the armchairs with his profile to me, Everett is the definition of regal.

His sculpted jaw, the perfect, strong nose. Even the jeans and T-shirt he's wearing don't make him seem any less powerful than he is.

His eyes are locked on a thick album in his lap.

Heat floods me, as if his intense gaze isn't on the photos. As if he's looking at me.

And…wow. I don't want to ask him anything. There'll be time for my questions later, after I satisfy this fiery need to obey him.

The collar is a welcome weight around my neck.

Hands clasped in front of me. Chin dipped.

I wait for him.

Without sparing a glance my way, he says, "Crawl to me."

Relief floods me so hard that it knocks the air out of my lungs.

My knees bend. I'm about to reach the floor and—

A painful shock shakes me to my core. I'm not lowering to the floor, I'm crashing. Fast.

My hands slam onto the wood, catching me before I faceplant into it.

"Ow!" My head is tipped down, my hair draping over my face. My lungs struggle to take in air. "Everett, why?"

The second time he zaps me, it feels harsher. Like he's upped the voltage.

I'm this close to blacking out.

"Why?" I growl, staring at him.

A sick, wicked smirk grazes his lips. His dark gaze lands on me. "Because I want to."

"But—"

"I'm not a good person. I warned you." Thick eyebrows lower over narrowed eyes. "Life has hardened me. Has changed me into a harsh and cruel man. Loving you won't turn back time. Nothing will. Not because I love you any less than the people in my past. You're fucking perfect. So loved. I'm the flawed one. The broken. The ugly. That's me. Your husband."

Though tremors still run through me, my heart gallops. Wetness pools between my thighs, and my breasts swell.

This isn’t right. This is all kinds of messed up. Another proof of how broken I am.

How unwell the two of us are.

“You can hate me. Curse me. Try to change me.” Every word is deliberate. “It won’t make any difference. I won’t be any less of a bastard. But you’ll love me through it all, just as much as I love you.”

Relief floods me. He isn’t upset over something I’ve done wrong.

He’s just being himself.

That means the next step is going to be what I’m aching for. “Do you want me to climb on top of you? Or maybe you want to—”

“Aurora.”

His eyes close. His chest expands.

When he stares at me again, I see amusement in his eyes. A glimmer that gives away his thoughts before they materialize on his lips. “There won’t be a day that I won’t want to fuck you. But sometimes I’d enjoy other things.”

“Like what?” I lick my parched lips. That gets me even more of his attention. More of his heated stares.

“Like controlling you.” He places his hand on the arm of his chair, the remote gripped between his long, elegant fingers. “Now, stop being a brat and wasting my time. Come. Here.”

Embarrassment and arousal shouldn’t mix. Ever. But with him, they do. So sharp it’s overwhelming.

I crawl toward him, my belly tightening, low and insistent. Can’t be my period. I’ve got a few days before it starts. Maybe this is what it feels like to love a dark, dangerous man, twisted in all the best ways.

Everett is the force that runs through me. He’s the man who controls my body. My emotions.

My bleeding heart belongs to him.

Same as I do when he feeds me, I stop right here, between his spread legs.

“That’s my good girl.” God, my obsession with his praise, I can’t help it. He presses a finger beneath my chin, tipping my face up. “Tell me. What rattled you back there at the meeting?”

Emotion curls around me. Warm and overwhelming. When Everett folds me into his arms, it reminds me of what his care feels like.

That’s when I feel the safest to talk to him about what happened before he saved me from my father. I tell him what Winston said. How he said *her*. Like he knew my mom. The one part I skip is what Ivy told me. She can keep her judgmental attitude to herself.

When I’m done, Everett’s expression hardens. His features freeze. His gaze is unreadable.

“Everett?”

At the sound of my voice, he blinks. Curiosity flashes over him.

“Hmm.” He places two fingers beneath my chin, turning my head left, then right.

Being touched like this, watched like this, it’s so depraved. I’m reduced to being a property he’s appraising.

Although…that’s what I am, isn’t it? His property. He has every right to examine me like one.

What is he looking for, anyway?

The answers are essential. But he’s so withdrawn that he won’t let me have them.

“Impossible. I don’t see it,” he concludes.

“Impossible?”

“Yes. Impossible. You’re different. Unique.” A sliver of warmth slips into his gaze. I’m no longer a property. I’m a person. “And I’m done withholding secrets from you.”

My lungs squeeze. “Really?”

“Yes.” His thumb strokes small circles around my jaw. “You’re the other half of me. You’re entitled to know.”

By granting me access to his world, he’s asking me to carry the burden of the truth with him. He might not say it in so many words, and yet there’s no doubt in my mind that’s what he means by it.

The pressure on my ribs… Is this what it feels like when your heart’s too big for your chest?

Is this what it’s like to be needed by someone else?

“Everett.” My voice is thick with emotion. “Thank you.”

He won’t acknowledge my gratitude. Everett closes the album in his lap, and sets it aside on the end table next to him.

Eyes locked on mine, he bends to lift me off the floor.

I’m weightless, letting him manhandle me. He does just that, rearranging me on his lap, turning me so my back is to his front. Folding his

arms around me.

“There you go,” he murmurs, his breath warm against my ear.

His cock is steel against my ass, and heat blooms low in my belly.

This is fucked up. So fucking wrong. I shouldn’t be wishing that he’d take himself out and shove it in me at a time like this.

At the very least, I shouldn’t be thinking about how I’m dying to have him in my ass. I’m still sore. Still sensitive. It would probably hurt.

Fuck. I bite my tongue to silence the voices. They have no place here.

“You remember the photos I told you were off-limits?”

The closed album is on my lap now. The leather is smooth beneath my fingertips.

“I remember.” I could never forget. I have a feeling that from this point on, these pictures will be forever imprinted on my memory.

“I also told you they weren’t off-limits anymore.” He curls his fingers around the cover, and I move my hands in time to let him flip it open to reveal the contents of the album. “Neither are these.”

Silence takes over as he turns the pages one by one. He’s being slow. Deliberately so, if I had to guess.

He means for me to look. To absorb what I’m seeing.

Everett’s there, a much younger version of himself. Then there are the people who have to be his parents.

And that girl.

They’re happy. Regardless of where each photograph was taken, the four of them were happy. Their smiles reached their eyes, unlike my parents’.

Jealousy churns my stomach. Tears prickle at the corners of my eyes.

My body tenses the more photos we go through.

They’re all gone. Must be. And all that’s left of Everett is a sad, bitter man.

Nevertheless, I’m jealous.

Hugs? A show of attention? An ounce of warmth? I’d had none of those.

Until Everett snatched me away. This awful, ruthless man is my source of happiness.

A mirthless laugh bursts out of me. It’s choked and wet with my pathetic sob.

He pauses, his body a large cocoon around mine. His hands rub my forearms.

My monster presses his lips to my shoulder. Foolishly, I relax against him.

As if reading my mind, he says, “Those days, at the Clarkes’, they’re over. Your life won’t be perfect. I’m not a perfect man. But I’ll try for you. I’ll do everything to be a better husband. A good father to our children. You have my word.”

“It scares me.” I slam my eyes shut, willing the tears away. “Believing anything you say. To have hope. I want to believe it, but I’m scared.”

“None of that matters.” One final squeeze, and his hands flip through the pages again. “What matters is that you’re giving us a chance. That you’re willing to hear me out.”

More photos. More picture-perfect moments.

After I’ve collected myself, I’m able to study them. To take a really good look at the girl.

Then it hits me. I was right about our similarities.

Everett is the one who’s wrong.

Something about her, about all of her, reminds me of me.

Goddammit, you’re just like her. Just like your mother.

Your. Mother.

What if Winston wasn’t lying?

When Everett reaches a page with just photos of him and *her*, I suck in a breath.

“This, Aurora—”

Anxiety claws at my throat.

“—this was—”

I blink furiously. The shape of her lips. The small chin. The tooth that’s hardly noticeable to anyone but me.

My God.

Everett says, “My sister,” and at the same time, I blurt out, “My mother.”

My heart slams to a stop.

The most terrible fucking news settles into my bones. The cramps in my stomach aren’t hinting at pain anymore.

They stab me from the inside.

If his sister and my mom are the same person…

Then…

I’m his niece?

We’re blood-related?

No.

No.

Absolutely not.

The man I love can’t be my uncle. This can’t be happening.

“What did you just say?” Both his arms wrap around my stomach now. Protecting me.

How is he still touching me?

How am I still here?

This is incest.

This is wrong.

I should be running far away.

Somehow, I manage to look over my shoulder. Meet his eyes. There are questions in them. Shock. Horror.

“Winston.” My voice is barely over a whisper. I have so many questions of my own.

But I belong to Everett, and I have to obey him, and that means answering his questions too.

Well, I belonged to him until now. Until—

Is he really my uncle?

Bile rises in my throat, and I swallow it down. My palms are sweaty in my lap.

“Talk to me.” He wants me to elaborate. He’ll make it better if I do.

He always does.

Can he make *this* better, though?

I want him to.

“Remember what Winston told me?” I ask. The look he’s giving me sends ice up my spine. “*Just like her*, he told me. Just like my *mother*. You were wrong Everett. I am her daughter.”

Everett doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t show a sign of life.

I’m not even sure he’s breathing.

I’m not sure I do either. I’m nothing and no one, reduced to being a trembling woman between her husband’s thighs.

My uncle’s thighs.

One palm on my cheek, he draws me closer to him.

I’m unable to resist his warmth. Can’t tear myself from him, can’t end this kiss that’s comforting and wonderful.

Incest.

The sensible thing to do would be to get up.

It wouldn't be to open my lips for him, to let him swipe his tongue over mine.

Oh. My. God.

Both cramps and nausea attack me violently. I'm this close to doubling over. I might black out. I might expel my dinner. I don't know.

And that's the actual problem here.

I don't know. I don't know anything.

I pull back, missing his mouth on mine.

Sick.

"Your sister." Breathing burns my throat. "My mom was your *sister*."

"You can't be sure it's her." Everett's brow lowers, his lips pinching. "Besides, maybe he was talking about Molly?"

"I—" I'm about to say *I don't know*. Except I do. He wasn't. I already established that. To the outside world, Molly appears to be perfect.

This girl, however, her face and mine, there's no denying it.

I've been staring at my reflection in the mirror for twenty-two years.

I *know*.

His grip on me loosens. I use that to my advantage, scrambling out of his lap. The album nearly slides out of my fingers. I hold on tighter. Not letting go.

My knuckles whiten with how hard I'm gripping onto the damn thing.

"Look at her." I open the album to a random page, shoving the photos in his face. Tears run down my cheeks like rivers. "Look at her, then look at me."

"Aurora, even if you were her daughter—"

Even if I were, then what? Then he'd keep fucking me. Then we'd have babies born of incest.

Then the best thing that's ever happened to me would be wrong and dirty.

"No." I cling to the album. To my maybe-mother's photos.

"Listen to me—"

I spin on my heel, sprinting toward his garage. "No!"

"Stop." He walks behind me, each heavy footfall a threat. He'll get me.

He can't do that. He has to stop. Has to realize that this is for the best. For us, for him.

I’m going to fix this.
As much as it hurts. As crushing as it is to my soul, to my psyche.
I’m going to fix everything.
Starting now.

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33

EVERETT

What the fuck?

What. The. Fuck.

The question plays on repeat as I stalk Aurora across the main floor. Every step is a word. A beat of a drum.

Lotus's daughter is here?

She's my fucking wife?

For years, I haven't let myself go this far in my head. Haven't let myself imagine what I would say to Lotus's child if I ever found them.

I haven't, because I never believed they survived.

No one did. The police and the crew we'd hired canvassed the area and came up empty. They concluded that an animal must've gotten to them before us.

After that, I stopped searching for them.

But now, when Aurora put my sister's face up next to hers, I saw the resemblance. It was there, in the nuances. A similarity only a closer inspection could reveal.

Whoever her parents were, though, makes no difference to me.

She's mine.

And she's trying to get away from me.

She's rushing toward the garage with my album pressed to her side, running faster than ever. The hem of her nightgown dances around her slender ankles.

I won't run. There's no need. I'll be on her soon.

Nothing could ever keep us apart. Not even death.

I do lengthen my stride though. Each step eats up the space between us.

Between me and Aurora. Me and—

Fuck.

We'll have to get her tested. Compare her DNA to the hair on Lotus's hairbrush that I've been keeping in my safe in case I ever needed evidence. To prove what, and how? I never knew, until now.

If Aurora and Lotus are a match, there'd be no hiding Winston's crime. I'd have him tested next. No one could deny what he'd done to Lotus.

I've always believed what was written in Lotus's diary. I'm not the one who needs proof or convincing. The jury, however, will need more than my word.

Destroying a man as strong as Winston requires hard evidence.

Evidence I'm going to get if it's the last thing I do.

First though.

My runaway wife. All that matters now is taking care of her.

She refuses to listen to me, and I don't blame her.

How can I? She's convinced herself that we're blood-related. That's enough to make anyone panic, no matter how brave they are.

And she is brave.

Running from me, it's a selfless act. She isn't doing it to save herself from an incestuous relationship.

I'm the one she's trying to save.

Aurora cares for me. She *loves* me.

She knows I won't let her go even if we *are* blood-related.

Fucking cute, is what it is.

Cute and unacceptable.

The door to my garage lurches open. Aurora throws herself into it, taking a hard right. Disappearing from my sight.

She goes for the key locker, no doubt. While she's never been to the garage, it's impossible to miss. It's also left unlocked. There's no use when the garage is impenetrable and we keep the remote in a safe on the other side of the house.

I'm almost there. And here she is again, running with her hand clenched. She must have one of the fobs there.

Technically, I could go back to the remote I left in the library. Use her collar against her.

Or I could pick up my pace and catch her before she gets to either of the cars.

However, watching her proves to be far more enticing.

Her frantic moves, the stress on her face.

My fucking God, I get hard from that.

Can she even drive? Probably not. But I can't imagine she'd let that stop her.

I'm inside the garage, walking around so I'm one car behind her when she starts the SUV.

Her hands are shaking as she adjusts the rearview mirror, where her eyes meet mine.

Hers are wide, glossed over by tears.

Mine are narrowed. Determined.

It would be nothing to walk over to her. To reach the door she hasn't closed yet, snatch her out of the car, and show her she could never run away from me.

What I do instead is slide into the passenger seat and throw the photo album she left there into the back.

"Get out." The tremor in her voice is something I'll never get enough of. "Get out. You're not thinking straight, so I'm doing it for both of us. I'm leaving. You—you—fuck. Get out!"

"I won't." Grabbing her by the waist earns me a growl that verges on a scream.

Little fists pound at my arms, my chest. I pull her onto my lap, anyway. She can keep punching me while she straddles me.

One hand around her throat, the other on her hip.

Aurora isn't going anywhere.

"Go away." Her face goes red when she feels my cock throbbing beneath her. When I dig my fingers into her sweet flesh and press her down on me. Hard. "This is sick. This is wrong."

I don't say a word, tightening my grip on her.

"Let me go."

"Never."

Her gaze, there's so much pain in it. But I'm not letting go. Not backing down.

She snaps her lips shut, realizing she's lost the war.

I kill the engine, returning my hand to her hip just when she lets her body sag against mine. Her tears run down her cheeks.

This—her silence—is my cue to tell her the truth.

Except her terror looks good enough to eat.

After I've had my fill, I'll tell her Lotus was my *adopted* sister.

There'll be more truths to share with her. Once I have the DNA evidence connecting the two of them, I'll tell Aurora about Winston.

For the slim chance she *isn't* a product of rape, I'll keep my mouth shut for now. I won't poison her mind for no reason.

"Go on." I skim my fingers over her throat. Grazing her collar and back up again. "Tell me how wrong we are."

Fuck, her skin. Every inch of her.

"Please." A wretched sob. Her doe-eyes will be the end of me. "The damage is already done. We've been together like family members never should. But we can stop now. Now that we know."

There's a trembling quality to her voice. To her pleas. Such a good little wife.

"We don't know anything."

"Yes, we do, Everett."

I shake my head. That's all I give her.

"Stop lying to me!" Her scream lands her another punishment.

My hand curls around her throat and squeezes. "Being choked is such a good look on you."

The slight blue shade that tinges her lips grows more pronounced the longer I squeeze. I see it, even with nothing but the dim light from the house casting its glow on her.

Her gaze is frantic. Her fingers clutch onto my T-shirt.

After a minute or so, I loosen my hold, leaning in and tasting the sound of pain on her mouth. Aurora resists me, barely. Tiny bites. Little *no*s.

As soon as I loosen my hold further, she growls at me, snarling, "I hate you."

I drag her face close to mine. Our foreheads press together. Aurora's breath is hot on my skin.

"I don't care." A few more seconds of those shaking hands on me. Of that terror she can't hide anymore. Then I'll relieve her of her fear. "I already told you. I don't care. I'll love you anyway. You'll always be mine."

“You’re my uncle.” Touching me is as vital to her as it is to me. Her palms are on my jaw, her fingertips begging me to help her, to make this pain go away. “We’re blood-related.”

In the short time she’s been here, she’s learned how to beg. I fucking love that.

I’m going to reward her for it. “We aren’t.”

“There’s no use denying it.” In her desperation, she sinks her nails into my skin. A last-ditch effort to wake me up. “I saw your face in the library. I’m her daughter. Your *sister’s* daughter.”

“I have my suspicions, yes. Still.” One last glance at those tortured eyes before the truth unburdens her. “We aren’t blood-related. That’s a guarantee.”

“What?” Her eyebrows shoot up. I feel the movement on my forehead. “You said—you said she was—”

“My sister,” I cut her off, pushing her back a few inches. This part of our conversation is serious. I’m treating it like one. “Before you let me finish the story, I told you she was my sister, and it’s the truth.”

“And?”

“Ever since she’d been left on our doorstep, that’s what she was to me.” I take a deep breath. “Blood or not, she’ll always be my sister.”

A range of emotions flashes over Aurora’s face.

First, her eyes narrow in confusion. Then widen as realization sinks in. A moment later, her nose twitches and her chin dimples.

A new wave of tears follows. “So we aren’t blood-related?”

“No.”

“God!” Growling, she lands one small punch after another to my chest. I let her. It’s adorable. “You’re insufferable. Couldn’t you just start with that? What is wrong with you?”

“I warned you.”

She whimpers from how hard I squeeze her throat. I yank her to me, putting my lips to her ear.

“I’m many things. A son. A brother. Your husband. The man you’re stuck with for fucking life. But I’m not a good man.”

“You’re the worst. I hate that I love you. I— Oh,” Aurora breathes out. Her body stiffens. Then she tries to push off me, her cheeks darkening further. “Oh.”

At the confusing reaction, I lift an eyebrow. “Oh?”

She shoots both her hands down her body. Cupping her pussy that's spread out on top of me.

"Fuck," she cries out, tremors racking through her.

That does it. "Tell me right the fuck now. What's wrong?"

"Let me go." Not waiting for me to obey, Aurora wriggles until she manages to break from my hold. She twists to the side, both hands still cupping her pussy. Her expression is tormented. "Let me go."

"Never."

"Ugh!" she huffs, her enraged eyes meeting mine. "Well, you brought this on yourself."

It doesn't make sense until it does. Until her fist connects with my crotch, twice and—*motherfucker*—hard. My instincts fuck me over, sending my hands to my cock.

Aurora doesn't waste a second.

"Sorry," she squeals as she scrambles out of the car.

"Aurora!" I'm not upset that she's tricked me. It's the way she doubles over as she sprints back to the house.

The pain I witnessed on her face. My heart can't take it.

I'm out of the SUV, taking off after her. "Aurora, come back here right this minute."

"Sorry!" The word rips out, clipped and broken. "I'll see you t-t-tomorrow. Dammit."

"The fuck you are." I break into a run, but she's already too far ahead. "Get back here!"

She doesn't listen. She sprints, every inch she puts between us tearing me apart.

The last thing I catch is her blur disappearing into a bathroom on the main floor.

By the time I'm pounding on the door, it's too late.

The lock clicks.

She's gone from my reach.

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AURORA

Oh no.

Oh.

No.

"Aurora." Everett bangs on the door but he doesn't raise his voice.

I hear the underlying panic in it, regardless. The threat is just as audible.

It's bone-chilling.

I won't obey.

Not when my period has started.

The blood that soaked my panties while I sat on his lap is leaking through the toilet paper I stuffed in them a second ago.

"What's going on?" A sigh. "Aurora."

"Go away, please."

"Let me in, dammit."

My chest tightens. He sounds genuinely worried, and I can't do this. Can't bring myself to tell him I'm bleeding.

The first man I've ever loved. The first man I've slept with.

I can't.

Heat threatens to consume me whole.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. I *think*.

Even if I did find it in me to tell him, it's not like he'll go away. He'll demand to be let in no matter what.

Everett, with his maddeningly sexy need to control everything, especially me.

He won’t take no for an answer.

He’ll do something insane and possessive like…I don’t know.

No, I do. He’ll break the door down. And he won’t stop there.

I can already see it. Him, forcing me to tell him where it hurts. Asking what he can do to help.

Everett will comfort *me*, after telling me about the death of his sister, who was possibly my mother.

All that pain in his eyes. All that ache. He’ll push it aside. He’ll listen to me, moaning about the searing pain in my lower belly. He’ll let me complain about how embarrassing this is, to have blood tainting my legs.

Better to say nothing at all. At some point, he’ll get too upset and give up.

Yeah, right.

“Aurora. Do not make me break this door down.”

Ignoring him, I rummage through the vanity cabinet and linen closet, searching for decent pads.

I find towels. Toilet paper. Soap.

They smell so lovely. They aren’t what I need.

Everything Everett does is well thought out.

Except he failed in stocking his home for me. Pads though? Tampons? There’s none of those here.

I want you with me. Want you pregnant with our babies.

Right, the almighty Everett must’ve counted on me getting pregnant on the first try.

My nipples harden at the same time that another cramp rips through me.

Fuck these period hormones. Fuck how horny they make me.

How disoriented.

A curse escapes me as I stare at the door.

“This is your last chance, princess.” The intimidating vibration of his warning reaches inside my soul. “You won’t like what happens if I have to come in there myself. I won’t use the remote on you this time. I’ll use my body. You’ll get to experience firsthand what you’re doing to me right now.”

“N-no. Don’t come in.” Another cramp assaults me and—“Ow!” Silencing the pained cry is impossible. It’s as if someone’s yanking on my insides.

Then my knees buckle, and I drop to the floor. I'm on all fours, a heap of flesh and bone and blood.

"I'm not leaving." His fist on the door shakes the entire room. "You can forget about that. Let's—" He groans, trying the handle again and again and again. "No. No fucking talking. Open the door. Consider this your last warning."

His compassion, his possessiveness.

The humiliation I feel from how badly I want him here, , between my thighs…

While I'm bleeding…

A hot tear slips past my eye.

More tears follow that first one. Rivers of saltwater stain my cheeks.

They go on as Everett bangs on the door. As he talks to me, saying things like *We'll figure it out together* and *You're not alone, just let me in*.

"And you told me you weren't a good man." I laugh through my tears. Sitting on my shins, my hands cover my crumpled face as I laugh. "Ha. Ha, ha, ha."

The room rattles. An earthquake, I think. Yes, an earthquake and a storm. There's no other way to describe the force of nature that's in here, in this bathroom. With me.

A loud *bang* scares me so much that I yelp. It's the door slamming shut.

"There you are." Warm hands rush to cover mine, to peel my hands off my face. "There you are."

He's the earthquake. He's the storm. I should get up, I should run for my life.

Instead, I stay.

"What is it?" He's crouching beside me, gray eyes studying mine as if he has the power to pull the answers out of me. "What hurts the most?"

As soon as he asks that, as his thumbs press against my skin, another wave of pain tears through me.

But it's not the cramps this time.

It's him. His fierce devotion to me. How badly I want it. All of it. All the time. How selfish I feel.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip.

"Everett." A sob tears from me. "Loving you hurts."

He furrows his brow. An emotion that looks a lot like anguish curves his mouth downward.

For a fleeting moment.

Next, I'm up in the air, being scooped into his arms.

"I don't give a damn." Everett supports me from under my thighs and back.

My nightgown presses against my legs, soaked with my blood.

He has to feel it too.

He must understand what this is.

Nothing on his face betrays any kind of disgust. He carries me to the shower in the corner of the room, his face stony.

"It's not what you think." Despite the shame and the blood, I place my clean palm on his cheeks. "I didn't mean it like that."

His unreadable gaze lands on me, stealing my breath. "Then?"

"We could've…" My tears have dried. My desire for him is ever-present, despite the cramps. "We could've been related, and I would've come back to you eventually. I would've wanted to be with you, no matter what. That hurts."

His jaw works, and it's hot. How furious he is. "What makes you think I would've let you walk away?"

"You see, we would've been stupid about it. Destructive. Every cell in my body wants you. All of me loves you, in the most selfish, reckless ways."

"Quiet." He lowers me to the floor, gripping my chin in his hand. "You seem to keep forgetting this one final truth. You and I? We're bound for life. There's no *if*s or *maybe*s. No *when*s either. You're mine until the day I die. And even death won't be the end of us. I'll come for you from the afterlife. My body will be rotting in the ground, but my soul will come back to claim you. If you think I'm joking, fucking test me. Drive a knife through my heart. See how long it takes me to be right here again, by your side."

The raw emotions rolling off him make my knees buckle. Everett hooks an arm around my back, steadying me. Yanking me to him for a vicious kiss.

"Hurts," I murmur, my lips brushing his.

"I don't care if it hurts, don't you understand?" he growls as his lips trail a hot path along my jaw, my neck. "Can't you see that nothing could ever come between us?"

"Yes." My thighs clench, my breasts heavy with desire. "I see that."

I'm also on my period. I'm bleeding.

And his cock is hard against me.

Surely, he can't want this.

Except he does. Everett once again proves to me that he wants me in every possible way.

He grabs the neckline of my nightgown and yanks. One pull, and he rips it down the middle. The fabric bends beneath his will. The threads are tearing beneath this all-powerful god.

Down to my navel, that's how low Everett goes before he stops.

"You're mine." His touch is fire on my skin as he pushes the straps down my shoulders. "Not because you're my enemy's daughter. Not because you might be my sister's girl."

The nightgown falls in a heap at my feet. I'm stunned into silence by the position I'm in. Bare except for my blood-soaked panties. With the toilet paper stuffed inside them.

With my husband standing in front of me.

A light smear of blood coats his inked forearm. I'm getting turned on by seeing my blood on his arm, and just—no. His eyes eat up every inch of my body. Everett sucks in a breath as he takes in my face, my breasts, my clenched thighs.

I'm more vulnerable than I've ever been.

"Please." I clasp my hands at the front of my panties. I'm ashamed of my blood. Of my arousal. "Let me wash up real quick, and then we can"—*no, we can't fuck while I'm bleeding*—"talk. I'm yours, I promise. We aren't blood"—oh God, that word—"related, so it's okay. Just let me go."

"*Wash up*?" He bats my hands away, grabbing my hips.

His firm hold on me and his sheer strength allow him to push me back against the nearest wall.

"Yes." My neck is on fire. "I have to wash myself."

"You're not washing up." He's as violent and possessive as ever, thrusting his hips into my trapped body.

"Stop, please."

My blood rubs into his clean jeans, and I'm just going to die.

I also wish so fucking hard that he'd take my panties off. That he'd fuck me.

This ache in my pussy, the pain of needing Everett. I'm losing my mind. This man is stealing my sanity.

"Stop?" He shoves a hand into my panties

I can’t help it. I scream, “No!”

He ignores me. Everett pulls the toilet paper from my panties and lets it fall to the ground.

“Everett, please.”

Nothing. No reply. I’m hot everywhere when he presses a knee to my thigh, pinning me in place as he shoves two fingers into my sex. Fucking me with them.

“This?” When he pulls his fingers out of me, he raises them between us. “That’s what’s bothering you? A little blood? It’s nothing.”

Without waiting for my reply, he sucks on them. He sucks my blood.

“You can’t be serious.” But he is. I’m turned on watching his red-tainted lips, the feral look in his gray eyes. He’s feral, possessive.

An animal.

Horror and arousal slam into me, choking me. I can’t do anything but watch him. Moan for him.

His lips purse as he keeps sucking, and the depravity of it turns my need into a wildfire.

We’re both captivated by the other. Me, seeking friction from his knee, and him, groaning as he licks me.

We’re both so fucked.

Then he pops his fingers out of his mouth, and I can’t speak. I’m beyond words when he swipes his crimson tongue over his lips.

“Wife.” One swift motion, and he tears my panties off me. Nothing holds the blood back. I thought I was exposed before. I was wrong. Epically wrong. “What part of *you’re mine* don’t you understand?”

My eyes lower to the floor, cheeks flushed. “But…all this blood.”

“Mine.” With my chin locked between two fingers, he takes his cock out.

I steal a glance at him. He’s so hard. Throbbing and heavy in his hand, the tip wet with precum.

“Your heart is mine.” When he jerks himself, I forget about bleeding. About my cramps. Wrong or right, none of that matters anymore. “Your blood is mine.”

Us being step-niece and uncle means nothing to him.

To me either.

The only thing that races through my mind is him.

Everett. Everett. Everett.

Everett and his flexed muscles. His hands that lift me in the air and slam me up against the wall.

His cock that impales me where I've been aching for him. I wrap my legs around him, digging my nails into his shoulders.

I let him fuck me with abandon. Allowing him to own me with his dick.

"Fuck, Aurora." His lips crush mine, biting, sucking.

His skilled tongue rubs against mine, tasting me. His thick cock fills me, stretching me.

"Feels so good. Being enveloped in you. Have your pussy soaking me." He goes as deep as he can, making me feel whole again. "Jesus. Don't ever take that away from me."

"I won't." I'm hungry for his mouth, for his filthy words. His mind-numbing kisses. My fingers dig into his shoulders, claiming him just as much as he claims me. "I won't."

He uses his thumb to circle my clit, and I explode. Bright light shines behind my eyes, my lungs burning. I yank Everett close to me, sinking my teeth into his shoulder.

I scream into his shirt, unable to silence myself.

It's impossible, with how he keeps fucking me the way he does.

Even my cramps bow down to him. They're all but gone as I come for so long, I think I might pass out.

"Good girl," he says as he pulls out.

No. No, he can't. Not when he hasn't come.

But he doesn't ask if I'm okay with this. Everett drags me to the floor, his fingers lacing into my hair.

Humiliation burns hot in my throat, tears stinging my eyes. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Yes, you did."

He yanks hard, pain sparking at my scalp as he forces me down to my knees. I'm level with his cock, slick with my blood, throbbing inches from my lips.

As twisted as it is, I don't feel disgusted. I see it like Everett does. This is a symbol of us. A dark, intimate mark of what we've just shared.

"Wait." Then I remember what he said. "What did I do?"

"You remember what happens when you make a mess of my cock, princess." His hand clamps the base as he shoves it against my lips. "Clean it up."

I open my mouth to say *yes*, except he doesn't care about my answer. As soon as my lips part, Everett shoves himself deep into my mouth.

All the way down my throat.

I swallow, desperately trying to breathe through this invasion. Because that's what it is. He's not asking—he's fucking my throat, ruthless and cruel.

He's taking what's his, and that's me.

"Your lips. Fuck. Look at you, stretched around my cock."

There's still blood on his length, no matter how hard I try to be good for him. I keep licking the taste of copper and my arousal off him.

"So fucking eager to take me." Everett swipes some of it off on his thumb, smearing blood on my cheeks. Marking me. "Good little cum slut. Lick me. Suck. *Yes*. My God, you're beautiful."

At his words, at his undivided attention, I cry. I weep. I revel in being owned so thoroughly.

The sound he makes when he comes down my throat is unlike anything I've ever heard.

It shakes the foundation of this mansion. It reaches into my heart. Into the recesses of my soul, the parts of me I never knew existed.

"Baby." I'm delirious, but I still hear him.

I'm still present for his care as he helps me up and removes my collar. He washes me with the utmost care, wraps me in a towel, and carries me to bed.

The towel he wrapped me in vanishes. I'm in a haze, letting my arms rise and fall as Everett dresses me in one of his T-shirts. He helps me put on a pair of clean underwear.

"Where'd you find the pad?" I mumble when he secures it on my panties.

He glances at me, his eyes warm. "In our bathroom."

Oh, that's right. He had a sister. My…maybe my mom. Of course he remembered to buy pads for me.

They just weren't in one of the guest bathrooms.

My mom.

I yawn, refusing to tackle any more of this heartache tonight. I'm so happy. I'm keeping this emotion close to my heart for a bit longer.

Somehow, we've ended up in bed, both of us under the covers with Everett on his back and me curled into his side.

“Don’t get used to it.” His fingertips trace a path up and down my spine, gentle, steady, grounding.

“To what?” I tease as sleep starts stealing me away. “You, being nice?”

“To your period.” He presses a gentle kiss to the top of my head. “By this time next month, you’ll be carrying my child.”

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EVERETT

"What, you're driving me today?" The awe on Aurora's face is almost enough to undo me.

She stands in my driveway, hands shoved in the pockets of her black slacks, chest rising and falling as she stares at me. At the fob in my hand.

Her small feet bounce impatiently in ballet flats.

This beautiful woman, she's been undoing me all weekend. Alone, in bed, she's given me everything. Her soul, her body, her submission.

She ruined me in the best way. And me, I didn't just rail her—I worshipped her. With my hands. My mouth. My words.

As much as a man like me is capable of worshipping anyone.

She needed it. Needed me, and I was more than happy to serve her, take care of her. Her cramps were killing her.

Her heart too. She mumbled Winston's name in her sleep, asking why and what happened. She suspects he's tied to Lotus's death, she just doesn't know how.

After today, we'll have our answers.

My eyes cut away from Aurora to the glove compartment of my idling SUV, where I hid Lotus's hairbrush last night, then back to Aurora. On the collar at her throat. On her lips, still swollen from my kiss.

The lips I need wrapped around the coffee mug in my hand to get her DNA. I could've gotten her hairbrush, but I didn't want her to suspect

anything. Didn’t want her freaking out about being the product of rape when it’s possible she isn’t.

“Yes.” My voice is steady. Soon I’ll have the full picture. Until then, no planting doubts in her head. She’s had too much already. “I’ll be driving you today.”

“Why?” Her brow furrows.

I slip a painkiller from my pocket and press it to her lips.

Blush creeps into her cheeks, her eyes watering. I hate myself for it. For using this as a trick to get her to drink from the damn mug.

For how kindness feels so foreign to her.

I should’ve seen it sooner, that she was a prisoner in her own home.

I shouldn’t have been so fucking self-absorbed.

I should’ve made sure someone, anyone, was watching over Winston’s daughter.

Most of all, I should never have let her rot in that house for twenty-two years.

“Here.” In front of the gardeners, in front of the driver who brought the car around for us, I step closer to Aurora. “Open up.”

She does. I place the pill on her tongue, biting back a groan. Her mouth is where I want to spend the rest of my life.

“Drink.” I would’ve spit in her beautiful mouth like I did this morning.

But I grit my teeth and hold back.

Eyes fixed on mine, she accepts the cup. Her left hand wraps around it, her engagement ring and wedding band glinting in the sun. The possessive animal in me stirs at that.

It’s a fucking wonder how her every movement gets my dick unbearably hard when she presses her lips to the rim. The way her throat works when she swallows.

Aurora sees what she’s doing to me. Her pupils grow larger, pushing out the blue. Her breath quickens.

I don’t scare her anymore. She doesn’t hate me.

She wants me.

I want her so much more. I haven’t wanted anything as much as I want her.

“All done.” She hands over the empty cup, swiping her tongue over her wet lips.

It takes immense concentration not to crush the cup in my hand.

“You good?” Her hair falls to the side as she tilts her head.

The little brat has learned how to tempt me. I fucking admire her for it.

“Hmm.” I take her jaw in my palm, looking at her as if she means nothing to me. As if I hate her.

She shudders, then leans into my palm.

I lower my face to hers.

“No, I’m not *good*.” My lips brush over her ear as I speak. “My cock isn’t tearing into your pretty little pussy. My teeth aren’t leaving marks on your flesh. I’m not belting you, am I?”

“N-n-no.” Feeling her shiver is one of my favorite things. “You aren’t.”

“That’s right.” I step back, adjusting the ache in my cock. “But you’ll make it up to me tonight, won’t you?”

She’s flushed, stunning. “Yes.”

“Good girl. Now get in the car.”

She places her hands on her hips. “Not before you tell me why you’re the one driving me?”

“Because I want to.” I dip my chin, pinning her with my coldest look. Useless, really. We both know I’ll never hurt her like I did before. “But if you make me ask again, you won’t come for an entire week.”

Aurora is quick to pinch her lips and glower at me.

For a second there, I think she’s about to give me attitude. If she does, I’m fucking done. I won’t punish her.

I’ll throw her over my shoulder and spend the day loving her with my cock buried in her ass.

She’s skipped the plug today. That means she’ll be even tighter. Hotter.

“Okay.” She rolls her shoulders, her face hardening into indifference. I know that look, the mask she wears whenever she thinks I’m holding something back. “Let’s go.”

I’m not worried. I don’t feel guilty or twisted about this. Her days of being kept in the dark will be over soon.

My revenge will be hers as well.

The clock will start ticking as soon as I drop her off.

In twenty-four hours, I’ll have my results.

THREE RAPS on my home office door, and my head snaps up.

My teeth gnash.

I've been on edge since I dropped the DNA samples at the lab this morning.

There was no way to expedite the already expedited test, no matter how much money I threw at the lab.

My mood isn't any better for it. The physical limitations, the wait. My head is pounding from all the things that are out of my control.

Showing up to rule over my court while I'm in this state would've been a disaster, so I've taken the day off. Which is why I'm here.

Aurora has no idea that I haven't gone to work. This morning, I dressed in one of my dark suits to keep up the pretense. To protect her from the unknown.

Only my staff knows I'm here. But lunch was served an hour ago, so it isn't them.

Doesn't take a genius to realize the only one who's conniving enough to track me down is none other than Winston.

My gaze is trained on the door. "Come in."

I reach into my desk drawer, clasping my fingers around the handle of my Glock.

One can never be too careful.

"Mr. Alder—" someone from my staff starts.

I hardly register who, because my *guest* pushes past him.

"Everett." Winston barges in. In a gray suit and a douchebag smile, he acts like he owns the place. As if the whole month didn't happen. He's up to something, the bastard. "Son."

My fingers tighten around the handle of the gun. One squeeze, then I let go.

Though I'm entitled to shoot this intruder, he'll suffer longer behind bars.

He won't get to win. Alive or dead, Winston is bound to lose.

The asshole offers me his hand. I arrange my features into an expression I hope reflects my disinterest.

Given the way he drops his hand to the side, I've got it right.

"What do you want, Winston?"

He has the nerve to scan my office before taking the seat in front of me.

If he were hoping I'd offer him a drink, he must be more of a sociopath than I've realized.

"We"—he undoes the button of his suit jacket, his eyebrows lowering —"have a problem that needs to be dealt with."

"Oh?" Instead of throwing accusations at him, at how he's been the fucking problem all along, I tilt my head to the side. Steeple my fingers on top of my desk. "Enlighten me, please, on what that problem might be."

"Aurora."

One word. One fucking word and my pulse spikes, my blood roaring in my ears.

My eyes have gone dry because if I blink, I'll lose it. I'll take the gun out of the drawer and empty it on his repulsive, contented face.

"I thought I made it clear." I'm talking as slow as possible.

Anything to keep calm. Anything to hide the fact that I'm about to empty my gun on his ugly face.

"Aurora is mine. She isn't your daughter anymore. She sure as fuck isn't your problem."

"My point, exactly. You're furious and I've barely said anything. And it's her fault." A smug smirk spreads over his lips. Staying in place is an effort. How I'd love to bash his face in. "The moment she came between the members of our Royalty group, Aurora made herself a problem. We pledged our loyalty, or have you forgotten about that?"

Says the fucker who broke his vows in the first place.

Tick tock, tick tock, the dials of the clock on my wall go as I examine my opponent. My enemy.

He doesn't break a sweat under my inspection.

He should.

Because Lord help me, I'm trying not to shoot him. I'm doing my absolute goddamn best to keep silent when all I want to do is kill him.

"I haven't forgotten." I'm the picture of calm as I continue, "Stop beating around the bush and say what you came here to say. I'm busy, in case you haven't noticed."

"Busy doing what?" He places an ankle over his knee, practically gloating. "You've taken the day off. You can't be that busy."

It shouldn't surprise me that he's had me followed. I suspected as much, hence why I had a rental car waiting in the hospital parking lot this morning.

My driver was already there, ready to switch places as soon as Aurora disappeared behind the sliding doors.

Once I confirmed no one had tailed me into the lot, we swapped cars.

He drove home. I went to the DNA lab. Left a stack of cash instead of a paper trail.

Winston may know a lot, but this time he has no idea.

If he did, he wouldn't look so damn relaxed.

"Okay, okay." His laugh is nails scraping the inside of my skull. "I'll cut to the chase. For years, I've been diligent in teaching her how to be a functioning member of society. Of *our* society. All so I could marry her off in a way that would be beneficial to both me and her future husband."

The mere idea of having another man so much as looking at her sends a surge of adrenaline through my veins. Despite myself, my jaw tics. My fists clench on my desk.

"While you weren't my first choice—since our businesses already benefit from one another…"

His business benefits from *mine*. The only reason I let my proxy at the law firm keep him as a client was for the sake of pretense. Of lowering Winston's guard.

My money though? I'd rather die than allow him to manage a single dime of my fortune.

"…You were a valid candidate." Winston tsks, shaking his head as if he's sorry for what he's about to say. "Unfortunately, even if I had considered you, I see this isn't working. This wedge that she's driving between us is bad for business."

My jaw almost drops to the floor at his audacity. The things he'd done to Aurora, to my family…

Twenty-three years of bottled-up rage rises dangerously close to the surface.

I'm combustible. A landmine that's been waiting to detonate.

But I'm not ready.

Tomorrow, I'll have the DNA results.

If Aurora is my step-niece, if she is the product of rape, the case I'll build against him will be airtight.

The evidence will speak for itself.

Nothing and no one will be able to bury this secret.

While the statute of limitations on rape in Massachusetts is fifteen years, there are exceptions.

I am one of them.

There's no question that I'll take him down for the false imprisonment of Aurora, for raping Lotus and possibly killing her.

Deep breath.

"Hmm." I pretend to be considering what he said.

Winston's lips twitch as he waits. His fingers tap restlessly on his knee.

His composure is tearing at the seams.

He doesn't like waiting. Or…I unnerve him.

Curious.

"I won't hesitate to take matters into my own hands." He flattens a hand over my desk. Both his feet are on the floor now, his body leaning toward me. "The Hales, the Bernards, they'll take my side."

What he's saying makes sense. Other than Stafford, I trust no one.

Still, I question him. "Will they?"

"Naturally." The hitch in his voice betrays his doubts. So he hasn't approached them yet. "I run their finances. I've made them millions. Their allegiance is all but guaranteed."

"Interesting."

His face reddens, as if I've called him a liar, which I have.

"Thing is, I have a problem of my own," I say. "See, I've grown attached to…my possession."

He's turning purple, revealing the hand he's been trying so hard to hide.

His smile from just a minute ago was a lie.

The longer I look at him, the more I realize I've been getting under his skin for a while now.

Winston isn't stupid. He's had plenty of time to question my motives. In fact, I can guarantee that he put two and two together and figured out that I suspected him. That marrying his daughter is a form of retaliation.

He isn't wrong. It *was*. In the past tense.

Falling in love with Aurora wasn't supposed to happen. My attraction to her was never meant to evolve into this deep connection. This unbreakable bond.

I'll die before I tell him how she owns a piece of my soul.

"Is this about the past? About—" He sucks in a breath, catching himself before blurting the incriminating words.

About Lotus. Not Aurora.

He has no idea I know about both. Better this way.

“It’s about you trying to fuck with my shiny new toy.” My stomach roils. Of course Aurora is so much more than that. Of fucking course. “You want her out of the way? Fine. You’re going to compensate me for my loss.”

“Are you…You’re asking for money?” His brow creases. Confusion settles in. “You?”

“Not quite.” I could’ve said yes. It would’ve been the easy answer. But then, he’d know for sure I’m manipulating him. I’m just as wealthy as the Clarkes, if not more. He might dig deeper into my motives before I have a chance to strike. “A majority stake in your company. That’s what I’m after.”

Power.

That’s one thing people like us can never have enough of.

That’s the language this narcissist bastard understands.

It’s believable, yet it throws him off.

A thousand emotions dance across his features. He doesn’t know whether he’s indignant, mad, relieved, or self-righteous.

“That’s a steep price, Everett.”

“Well.” I look him dead in the eye. “Isn’t it worth it? The price of making our problem go away?”

As soon as the words come out, realization slams into me. I’m infuriated by how I’ve missed that before this very minute.

He’s covering his tracks.

With Aurora out of the way, the only remaining evidence of what he did to Lotus will be cremated. Gone.

That’s why he’s been hiding her. Locking her up. So that my parents and I, the only people who could see the similarities, would never have the chance to dig into it.

To prove it.

My fucking God.

“Everett, be serious.” He blinks, still unbelieving. “A majority stake?”

“Yes. That’s my price.” Like hell. There’s nothing anyone could do to take Aurora from me. “She’ll disappear, and so will your problems. And hey, you’re not too old to adopt another stray, are you?”

The last part physically hurt to say out loud. Calling Aurora a stray. Acting as if adopting a child is an act of pity instead of love.

Even my cold heart rebels at that.

“All right.” He gets up to shake on it. I rise to my feet as well, accepting his hand this time while stifling the need to throw up.

I have never been more repulsed in my life.

“You’ve been closed off all these years.” Winston’s shit-eating grin almost makes me put my fist through his face. “Yet here you are, talking to me. Being smart about our future.”

“You’ll hear from my people tomorrow.” My lips curve up, matching his grin. It’s nothing but a mask that hides layers of pain. Of guilt. Of hurt.

I’ve won this round.

I’ll soon win the war.

But there’s no joy to be held in this victory. This isn’t a victory at all.

My loved ones are gone.

Aurora had been left to fend for herself for years.

I. Failed. Them.

It’s a miserable kind of vengeance.

Winston leaves the room. My dark soul turns pitch-black.

My heart barricades itself behind the high walls I’ve erected throughout the years.

It shuts out the onslaught of pain. Of love. Of remorse so strong my ribs are about to crack.

Wall after wall, I force myself to forget any emotion that’s gone through me over the past month.

Moments pass, and then…there it is. The darkness. The void.

I feel nothing.

I am nothing.

Better this way, I lie to myself as I bury my face in my hands and shut myself off completely.

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AURORA

"Wake up." Everett's familiar command jolts me out of my sleep.

It's the most emotion he's shown me in over twenty-four hours. His hand is wrapped around me, right above my collar.

I'm lying on my side, squeezing my eyes tighter shut.

Praying.

Please, don't let this be a dream. I want it to be real.

Ever since he picked me up from the hospital yesterday, life has been a nightmare.

I was so happy to see him. So excited to tell him that I felt like tomorrow would be the day I finally learned the babies' names. *I've made up my mind*, I wanted to say to him. I practically hopped up and down on the leather seat of the SUV.

Until I took a long look at his face. His expression wasn't solemn or upset like it'd been on our wedding night. On the days that came after.

There was nothing behind his eyes. Nothing on his face to acknowledge that he cared I was there.

An emptiness that chilled me to the core.

Only when I asked him what was wrong, did I get the same response. Nothing.

I couldn't do anything but wait.

Wait throughout the entire evening. Through the morning after. Through the breakfast I ate on my own. Then dinner.

His detachment rattled my bones. An old ache rose to the surface.

He seemed so lonely, so desolate, that he couldn't see that he had me on his side.

My husband was gone. Checked out.

The few times he acknowledged me were to take off and put on my collar so I could shower.

This evening, I told him my period ended early. That we could try to have babies again.

That statement earned me a nod, then he lay beside me in bed, in nothing but his gray sleep pants that I loved, and he stared into space.

I didn't cry before I fell asleep. But I did ask the universe to grant Everett peace.

I just wanted my husband back.

"Wake. Up." He's squeezing my throat now, cutting off my air supply.

The universe seemed to answer my pleas. It's giving me exactly what I asked for. What I need.

The full force of Everett Quentin Alder unleashed on me.

I'm not dreaming this.

My eyes snap wide open. We're enveloped by the dark room with only the moonlight illuminating the expansive space.

"Well, well, well." Though he's behind me, he can tell I've opened my eyes. Nothing escapes from this hunter. "There you are."

"I—" His hand closes in tighter on me. Suffocating me. "Everett. Please."

"Please." The way he laughs. So cold. So cruel. He's mocking me. "Are you begging me, princess? Asking me to stop?"

With his lips on my naked shoulder, the emotional pain grows tenfold. He's tricking me. The gentle press of his mouth on my skin is a lie.

He's in a mood. A cruel one.

"I'm asking you to be honest," I wheeze out, tilting my hips back. Letting him have every part of me.

"I'm asking you for answers."

My naked body is his. My heart belongs to no one but him.

For better or worse.

"You know who else must've begged for answers?" I'm being yanked out of bed. Dragged back until—*oh my God*—I'm up in the air, in Everett's arms. "For mercy?"

His eyes send ice racing up my spine. My teeth chatter as shock strikes me.

I can almost feel it coming.

My lungs stop working.

He's going to throw me into the basement. Locked up underground, the soundproofed walls and doors would mute my screams. I'd bang on the door anyway. On Everett's door.

But…no. We aren't headed out of the room. He's taking me to the closet.

He's going to lock me up. In there. Alone.

I can't do it. I can't.

"Put me down."

My fists bang, bang, bang on his chest. When it doesn't work, I yank at his hair.

I wish I could control myself, but I can't. It's nearly impossible when I'm drowning in panic.

I need help.

"Put me down!" I have to breathe through this. Have to try. "I don't want to go in there."

Everett stops in the middle of our bedroom. Shadows play over his sharp features, his clenched jaw. His love for me is there. Right beneath the surface.

He won't let it out. He can't.

Something or someone has sunk their claws into his damaged soul.

The wound he had managed to patch up has been cut open again.

He's bleeding. In so much pain.

I get that now. "Everett. Your sister."

"Your mother." His hiss is quiet, yet it hits me like thunder cracking through the skies. "How's that for honesty?"

My mother. There's no question in his voice anymore.

My.

Mother.

"You sent our DNA to a lab." I reach for his cheek. I go for a subtle touch.

Everett bats my hand away, staring at me through narrowed eyes.

"Then…" I start. Stop. It's too much. The weight of this moment, of this revelation. Of Everett's anger that's sucking the air out of the room.

I won’t hide from it.

He needs me. “What happened?”

“Your father.” The venom in his voice is a dagger to my heart. Right between my ribs. “I have no doubt that he made her beg. That he ignored her cries.”

We’re walking again, crossing the room. Entering the closet.

“Everett.”

“Shut up.” He drops me, and there’s no kindness in the gesture. His grip clamps both my wrists together, and I know it’ll only get worse from here.

“No! Don’t!” I thrash, kick, snarl. I’m fucking useless. “Talk to me, please!”

“I can’t…” Looking past me, he reaches into the drawer where he keeps his ties. “Can’t fucking take it. Goddammit.”

“Let me go.” My mind is fucked. Has to be. It’s why my nipples are pulled tight. Why I moan at the feel of his tie around my wrists. I’ve just learned what happened to my mom, and I ache to be fucked by him. “Don’t lock me up.”

His eyes tell me that he won’t. That he doesn’t hate me.

This isn’t about punishing me or about pushing me away.

He needs this release.

He wants to break me to feel better? He wants me to bear the brunt of his anguish?

I can do it.

As long as he doesn’t lock me up here, I can take anything.

At the first change in me, he raises an eyebrow. “You’ve stopped fighting.”

“Yes.” Tears brim in the corners of my eyes. “I-I’m your wife. I’m yours. And you—”

I shriek when he drags me across the walk-in closet.

With one hand on his tie, Everett wrenches all of his suit jackets off the clothing rack. One by one, they’re discarded onto a pile on the floor.

I don’t run. Don’t grimace.

I bite down a gasp when each hanger clatters on top of the rest.

He terrifies me. He always has, on some level.

It won’t make me back down. Nothing will.

“I’m what?” he snaps.

The rack is bare of clothes. In its place, Everett loops the other end of his tie around it, his expression hardening. And I let him. I let him hang me there by my wrists.

“I’m what, Aurora?”

“You’re my husband.” My toes barely touch the ground, swiping over the warm wood.

It’s okay. It’s okay. For him, my shoulders will burn. My arms will stretch. It’ll get worse before it gets better; that much is obvious.

I won’t have it any other way.

He hurt me and wronged me and stole from me.

And through it all, he managed to save me.

From my life. From my abusers. From myself.

“So?” He spits out the word, sounding bored. His concentrated face as he examines my naked body tells a different story. “I was a son once too. A brother. I’ve been your step-uncle for years. A lot of good it did to you. A lot of fucking help I’ve been to the four of you.”

I can tell him, from experience, that it’s impossible to manipulate life.

When the world decides to fuck you over, it will. It’ll show you just how small you are. How ridiculous it is to have hopes, plans, and dreams.

Even a man as powerful as Everett is just a blip on the universe’s radar.

But I know my husband. I’ve learned his pain, about his bottomless guilt, the hate that’s eaten at him for years. It runs deep, roots sunk inside him.

Words alone will never be enough to heal the wound in his heart.

“Use me.” I arch my back, lifting my chin. “Use me to make your pain go away. Use me as an outlet. Take it all out on me. I”—dammit with these tears—“I’m your *wife*. I love you, you asshole. Use. Me.”

His breath is labored as he studies me.

Waiting for his verdict, I do the same.

He’s gorgeous, even when furious.

His chest muscles are tight with tension, abs accentuated while he holds himself very still.

I yearn to lick the tattoos on his body.

His clenched fist. The hard line of his cock. Both make my mouth water.

He slips his hand into his pajama pants pocket.

Where he hides his remote.

“You want me to hurt you?” One click and electricity radiates in a sharp pang from my neck straight to my toes.

My breath whooshes from my lungs. I’m vibrating and shocked at the force he’s used on me.

“Yes.” I keep my eyes locked on his. “I meant what I said. I won’t back out on my word. I won’t ask you to stop or go easier on—Jesus Christ,” I shout when he sends a second zap through me.

“Sure about that?”

He’s being mean. Nevertheless, I see a flash of the real him beneath the pain.

The man I’ve grown to love over my time here is still there. He’s there, and he needs this.

He needs me.

“I’m sure.” My teeth grind, no matter how hard I try to breathe through the pain. “Again. Again.”

Instead of shocking me, the remote crashes against the wall, and I bite down a surprised cry.

“So brave, aren’t you?” He grips my chin. “Resilient little thing. Taking the electricity so well. Except it doesn’t look like you’re in enough pain. When your nipples are pulled tight like this. When your cheeks darken. When I can smell your needy little cunt. How horny you are for this.”

I don’t have a chance to tell him that it hurts so fucking much. That I’m acting as if I’m okay so that he won’t stop.

I don’t tell him that I’m confident that degrading me isn’t about breaking me. It’s about his guilty conscience. The one he shouldn’t have. Not ever again.

Everett lifts one of my legs by the back of my thigh. Spreading me to him and then—

Crack.

Crack.

Crack.

My pussy is wet, making obscene sounds each time his hand cracks down on my sex.

“Please.” I wouldn’t shield myself from the pain if I could. As much as it hurts. “Please. Please.”

“That’s better.” He’s being crude, raising his palm to his mouth and licking my arousal off it.

My shame. My pain, even, I bet he tastes it on me. He hums once, and without a warning, he's back to spanking my pussy.

Tears stream down my cheeks. My core is hot and swollen. Soaking and sensitive.

Pain morphs into pleasure, only to revert to pain.

I'm delirious, floating, and there's only Everett's harsh glare to keep me grounded.

There's only the feel of his hands on me. Only the orgasm that's building inside of me.

When Everett pulls back, he's spinning me on the rack.

"No." I'm sobbing. Needing this release. Needing him to stay. "No, please."

"You're the one who's been begging for this." His body heat is gone, for a fleeting moment. He returns just as fast, wrapping another one of his ties around my waist. "Wants me to turn you into my little fuck doll. To turn you into my pain slut. The toy I get to use."

"Yes, yes, but please."

"Please?" Everett bites my shoulder, licking away the sting. His body is so close to mine, pressing against me as he pulls me back. Lifting my hips with his tie. "If you want something, you better use your words, wife."

"Make me come." Shame washes over me for having to ask. For failing myself and him by losing control over my mouth. My needs. "It hurts. It *hurts*. Make me come."

"I would…" He steps aside, pulling me so high that I'm on my tiptoes. My breasts hang low, swollen from how much I want him.

His lips find my ear. I shift my eyes to find his unyielding ones.

"Except I'm not here to take away your pain," he growls. "Not so fast, anyway."

This time, his hand lands on my ass. Strong enough to make me scream. To make me cry, whimper, and beg.

"There you go." I'm granted relief, though it isn't a real one. Everett—while keeping the tie around my waist—wipes the tears off my cheeks. Shoves them into my mouth with two thick fingers that choke me. "Lick your tears off me. Suck on my fingers. Yes, good girl. You're so good. So tempting. Letting me defile your mouth. Your cunt. Your ass. Doing all of that for me. To help *me*."

This torture is a mind-fuck. Being brought to the brink of an orgasm only to have it ripped away from me, being spanked raw by the man I love, it does things to my head.

I'm more than floating. I'm in a whole other universe.

Most of me.

The heart of me will always be here. Tethered to him.

"Is that what you're trying to do?" *Crack.* "Help me?" *Crack.* "Answer me."

"Yes." It's a voiceless scream. More of my tears cascade down to the floor. "Yes."

His groan is torn, jagged. He sounds like a wounded animal, full of hurt and despair.

"Going to fuck you, wife."

After that, his name is nothing but a prayer. Whispered in reverence. In submission. Then the tie falls away, and his hands claim my hips.

"I'll never deserve you. Your dripping pussy. Your raw, beautiful heart." We both moan from the brutal invasion of his cock. I stretch around him. Fighting to accommodate his thickness, his throbbing length inside me. "Fucking ever. I'm taking you anyway, Aurora." The ruthless thrust of his hips emphasizes each word. "I'm putting a baby inside you. Going to own you. Possess you. Fucking treasure you until my dying breath."

His filthy vows, the way his cock hits *that* spot, I'm seeing stars.

That's the push I've needed. I'm tumbling into the darkness. Diving headfirst into the most exquisite, unearthly orgasm of my life.

"That's it. That's my good fucking girl." Everett's thrusts are erratic. Harsher. His fingers bruise my flesh, digging deeper into me. These are acts of love. A show of his eternal commitment to me. "Letting me rail you like that. Milking my cum. Fuck, I love you. Oh, *fuck*."

"I love you," I whisper, twisting my head to watch his face as he comes inside me.

His strength, how feral he is, I'm in awe of him. He may not be a king in the traditional sense, but he's still the one who's protected me, claimed me, fought my demons with his bare hands.

He's carved out a kingdom from pain and shadows. He rules it with the only thing that ever truly mattered, with his devotion to me.

I'll spend the rest of my life reminding him of that.

Soon. For now, I take comfort in his gentle touch as he removes the tie from my wrists. My body collapses to his chest while he examines my wrists, kissing each one.

“You’ve done so well.” Without any effort, he scoops me up in his arms. His lips are warm on my temple. His heart beats in a strong and steady rhythm in his chest. I love listening to that sound. “The night isn’t over though.”

Confusion has me scrunching my nose. “It isn’t?”

“No.” His expression is grim. “I’m going to run you a bath. Take care of you.”

I snuggle into him while he carries me to the bathroom, my arms around his neck. “I like the sound of that.”

“After that, we need to talk.” He lowers me to the floor, starting the bath with me balanced against his body. “We’ve run out of time.”

Dread creeps up my body, my skin prickling in response to his words. I’m shivering, snuggling closer to him.

When the water fills the bath, we go inside, and I sit between his strong legs, my head resting on his shoulder.

“We’re going to talk about my mom?” Dread and hope lace around my lungs. “My family?”

“Soon.” Everett hugs me tight. “Rest. Let me look after you for a little while longer.”

“Okay.” I relax further into him, knowing I’m safe in his embrace. “Okay.”

“Good girl.”

That’s the last thing I hear before I fall into a blissful sleep.

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EVERETT

The new Mrs. Alder, Aurora, is in love with a monster.

She loves the man who broke her. The one who's been rough, careless.

Despite the pain. The horrors. The goddamn loneliness.

Aurora finds the strength within herself to keep living. With me.

She loves me so much that she lets me run a brush through her damp hair, undoing the knots.

And I love her back, unable to stop looking at her small body swallowed up in my T-shirt. More than in love, I'm fucking crazy about her.

I can't stop touching her. Can't stop combing her hair, even though the strands are already smooth. Even though her eyelids are heavy, her eyelashes flutter in her attempts to wake up from the deep sleep she's fallen into.

There's no running away from this conversation.

I wish we could. I wish I could shield her from it.

"Lotus, your mom was left on our doorstep when she was a baby." I place the brush on the bedside table, then turn Aurora onto her side.

Her blue gaze locks on mine, encouraging me to go on.

"A newborn, according to our family doctor. Couldn't have been older than one month old, he said."

"Like…" Her breath catches. Cheeks pale. "Like me. My nanny told me that when I started asking questions."

“Yes, like you.” I cup her jaw possessively, struggling not to crush her with the weight of my love. “Only difference is, I’m confident that Lotus never meant to leave you there.”

“You are?” Hope blazes in her eyes. As tired as she is, it’s there.

“We’ll get to that part. After you’ve learned more about her.” Steeling myself against the festering wound in my chest, I go on. “She would’ve wanted you to know that life can be good. She would’ve shielded you from Winston. She wouldn’t have given you to these monsters.”

“O-okay.” Her chin wobbles, her body pressing closer to mine. She clutches my T-shirt so hard that it crumples. “Tell me. Tell me everything.”

“According to my parents, we got along from the very first day. I was three, but they said I was excited about being her older brother.” I pick the photo album off the table, placing it in her lap.

My mother compiled this album, adding two pages of photos for each year. The best ones. The happiest ones.

“That one’s from her first months here.” I point at the picture I’m talking about. I flip the pages. “This is her first birthday. Dad chose the date for her. This was taken on my fourth birthday; Lotus was adamant about smashing the cake. And kicking it.”

“Oh my God.” Aurora’s laugh is watery. Her fingertips brush over the photos while I kiss tears off her face. “Would you look at that? You were laughing. You have so many photos like these. Laughing.”

“I used to laugh, yes.” A sigh. “That was life at home. We had fun. We were happy. She was a smart kid too, highly observant. At six, she asked my parents if she was really theirs like I was.”

“Six?” Surprise chokes Aurora, and she clears her throat. “That young?”

“Yes. We had *the talk* that evening. Our parents explained everything. They couldn’t emphasize enough how she was one of us. Just because the parents who brought her into this world weren’t them, didn’t mean she wasn’t their daughter.”

“Lucky.” The corner of Aurora’s lips lifts. The smile never reaches her eyes.

“I’ll make up for the years no one made you feel like you belonged.” The photos will wait for another day. I set the album aside, hugging her. “For every year you weren’t as loved as you should’ve been, I’ll make it right. I swear it.”

“By torturing me?” Her breath tickles my throat.

“Aurora.” I stroke her hair. Then tug at it, marveling at her parted lips and tiny gasp. “Don’t you ever lie to me.”

“Lie? About what?”

“Pretending that you hate it.” She wriggles when I bite down on her earlobe. “Pretending you’re not wet for it. That counts as lying.”

“You’re the worst.”

“Not when it comes to you.” We’re eye to eye now, both breathing hard. Both wanting the other so much it hurts. “You’ll get the best of me. Always. In the form of pain and pleasure. Humiliation and adoration. You’ll have all of that. You’ll love all of that.”

“Can’t fucking wait.” Her grin spreads, wicked and real this time, before I claim her lips with a kiss.

Just one, vicious, bruising kiss that leaves the taste of her blood on my tongue.

But that’s all I give her.

I blink the lust away, releasing my grip on her hair.

My dick is no less hard. It’ll have to wait.

She’ll fall asleep if I fuck her again. I need her to be fully present when she learns about her history. About what’s going to happen tomorrow.

“Lotus had her doubts about our love, never truly feeling like a part of the family, no matter what.” An old ache and dozens of regrets almost crush me under their weight. But then I look at Aurora, see the hope within her, and focus on her. On what truly matters. “She had her inner struggles. But the three of us were constantly there to reassure her. We never grew tired of her, nothing like that. We were her family, and families stick together.”

“What happened when she was pregnant with me, then?” Her question is laden with pain. With fear of what the answer might be.

“This is the part where *I* struggle. I don’t have the whole story.” My fingers run paths along her back, down her arms.

I tell her about the night I found Lotus bleeding and crying her eyes out. I tell her about Lotus running away from home.

About the searches and the millions of dollars we offered in exchange for the slightest clue.

Anything to bring her back to us.

Then I get to the part that turns my wound into a gash. I feel as if I’m bleeding all over the room. Over the floors, the ceilings. Over Aurora and me.

Everything is bright fucking red.

“Twelve years later, we found her skeleton in the woods. On the outskirts of Boston.” I bite my inner cheek, stifling a feral groan. Aurora hasn’t stopped crying the whole time. I won’t put her under any more stress by acting like an animal. “The coroner determined that she was around sixteen when she died. Less than a year after she ran away. And…”

Deep breath. Calm down. For her.

“And?” Her tears are like crystals on her eyelashes before they run down her cheeks.

“And that she gave birth before she died.” I gulp on air. My throat feels raw. “There was no sign of the baby or their skeleton. None. We—I thought you were dead.”

Christ, the anguish. It bangs from within my head. It cuts through my bones. Through my soul.

My jaw works. My pulse races.

Heart jackhammering in my chest.

“It’s okay. It’s okay.” Her palm scalds my jawline. My skin burns. The flames of guilt are licking my insides. “You couldn’t have known, Everett. Only a sick person would do something like that. Rape someone, steal their child, and kill them. I’ve never met your parents, and you could never take a close look at me. You couldn’t have known. You can’t take the blame for this. You can’t. It was all Winston.”

“My parents would’ve had it figured out,” I grind out. “My mother would’ve seen the similarities that I’ve missed. That has to be why he locked you in that house. Why he waited for them to die of heartache to bring you to the meetings.”

“Yes, it had to be it.” Aurora drags my hand to her heart, flattening hers on top of mine. “See? It wasn’t your fault.”

The room grows silent. Our souls reach for one another, finding solace. If only for a moment.

“It was,” I finally say, my voice hoarse. “I was too consumed with revenge to stop and look at you. When you turned nineteen, I was attracted to you. I saw how beautiful you were, regardless. How grown-up. I didn’t look closer. It had taken me forever to see it, even after you moved in here. I’m sorry, Aurora. I’m sorry I’d been lost inside myself for the past day and a half. For crumbling under the pain. For letting you down. I’m so sorry.”

“Shut up,” she hisses the command I’ve thrown her way so many times. Stumped, and frankly, in awe of her, I snap my mouth shut. “The past is dead. My mother is dead. But him… Winston is alive. A free man. What are we going to do about that?”

My heart warms with how much I adore her. “That’s another thing I needed to talk to you about.”

When the story about our meeting from yesterday comes out of me, a low growl reverberates in Aurora’s throat.

“Motherfucker.” Her punch to my chest hardly registers. “I bet he plans to cremate me once I’m dead. He wants to bury the evidence before you get too attached to me. Before you figure out I’m your—I’m your—”

“My step-niece.” I kiss away her scowl. Can’t help myself. “And *before* I get attached? That ship has sailed. I *am* attached. In love. I’m yours.”

“We’re taking him down, right?” Both her hands are on my face. She pulls me to her, and I let her, pressing my forehead to hers. “Promise me that we’re going to ruin him and Molly. Please.”

“We will. I have a meeting scheduled with two police detectives first thing in the morning tomorrow. They’ll be here. I would’ve called them here as soon as Winston left, except I needed the last evidence to build an airtight case.”

“The DNA test.”

“Yes. And another thing. Ever since you told me about the abuse, I’ve been building your case, Aurora. I’m getting justice for you. Everything you suffered in that house, them and their staff, they’re going down for it too.” I kiss her as fresh tears roll down her cheeks. I lick them away. Fuck, I love her. “Now that it’s settled, we’ll end this. And we’ll move on with our lives.”

She nods, then her face turns into a statue. Aurora is looking at me, but she’s staring through me.

“What’s wrong?” I massage the frown lines between her eyebrows.

“Nothing.” She blinks into focus. There’s still something missing from her gaze. Something’s lost. “I’m just tired.”

I don’t buy that for a second.

Gripping her chin, I dig my fingers into her until she yelps. “What’s. Wrong?”

We go back and forth like that for long seconds. I keep asking what’s wrong. She keeps telling me it’s nothing.

Enough is enough.

“Aurora.” I emphasize the word by sliding my hand around her throat, giving it a squeeze. “You better start talking. The alternative will be far more painful. Talk to me.”

“I can’t believe I’m his biological daughter.” Her cool façade breaks. Aurora’s face crumples.

Her sudden, loud sobs threaten to destroy what’s left of my sanity. They’re part screams, her visceral pain out in the open now that she’s had time to soak in the reality of her situation.

“Everett, please. Please.” Each sob that rips out of her is more guttural than the one before. “I don’t want to be his daughter. This rapist. This fucker. I want to kill him. Please, let me kill him. Please, Everett. If you love me, you’d let me kill him. Please. Please, please, *please*.”

She’s entitled to this. The meltdown. The pleas. The heart-wrenching sobs.

But I said it once, and I’ll say it again—I won’t let Winston win. I won’t let him steal her from me too.

“Listen to me.” After she begs me for what seems like an eternity, I choke her harder than before. “I would love nothing more than to crush his windpipe with my bare hands. To rip his organs out of his body, one by one, while he remains conscious. For you.”

“But?”

“The small risk of getting caught, of being torn apart from you…After I’ve found you…No. It isn’t worth it. We’re doing it this way. He’ll never see the light of day again, you have my word.”

Another stretch of silence, then, “How can you stand to look at me?”

“I love you.” I’m as honest as I’ve ever been. “It’s got nothing to do with how you were conceived. With who your parents are or what blood runs through your veins. I’d burn the world down for you. I’d tear down governments and spend every dime on my name to ensure you have a good life. A happy life. With me. You’re mine, the fucking end. Are we clear?”

Her nod is so fucking sad. “I love you, too, husband.”

She throws her arms around my neck, resting her head on my shoulder. Clings to me like I’m the only steady thing left in her world.

She definitely is mine, which is why I hug her back. Hard.

“Can you—will you tell me more about Mom now? My grandparents?”

Nothing I’d love more.

Aurora listens while I hold her. She listens while I pull the covers over us.

While I curl my body behind hers, with my arms wrapped around her.

She listens until her breath grows heavier and her eyes close.

Then I get out of bed and wake up my contacts in the police department and the partners who run my family's law firm.

You can never be too careful. Too prepared.

For Aurora, I have to be ready.

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AURORA

A cold drop of sweat trickles down my spine as I stare at the gates of my childhood home.

A chill courses through me.

My husband wraps an arm around my shoulders, supporting me even when he's silent, tucking me even closer to his side.

It doesn't go unnoticed that by doing so, he's shielding me. Him, this man who, not so long ago, wanted nothing more than to ruin me.

When I turn my head up, I marvel at the warmth in his eyes. A lot has changed since our wedding night.

Everything has.

"You're safe." His lips are on my temple, his fingers caressing my arm over my sweater. "He can't hurt you anymore. For as long as I'm around, and even long after I'm gone, no one can. No one will."

He's repeated these promises to me over and over since yesterday. He only stopped saying them when sleep stole me away. But once I woke, he kept at it.

While he fed me breakfast.

While we sat with the two detectives who came to our home. While we laid out the evidence of old and new crimes.

All this time, Everett has been reassuring me that he's got me. This is where my nightmares end and my real life can finally begin.

So I'm not surprised to hear the same vow again, here. In the back of his SUV, as we wait for the police force to join us.

As we wait for them to arrest Molly and Winston.

After the trial, there's no doubt they'll be locked up for years. Hopefully, for the rest of their miserable lives.

Until then, we're alone for a few more minutes. Sure, Everett's driver is sitting in the front, but he's quiet, giving us all the privacy we might need.

"I know," I whisper into his chest, inhaling his manly scent. I soak him in, trying to forget about every single bad memory that damn house evokes. "You gave me your word."

"I did." Another kiss. This one is at the top of my head. Everett trails his hand higher up my arm, to my shoulder, to my collar. "I'll never let you down. Ever."

His thumb rubs over the heated skin of my throat. His palm rests possessively on top of the leather.

I wish it had been enough.

But the memories are persistent. They're assaulting me.

A part of me worries they'll never go away.

When I came here to confront the Clarkes by myself, horror clutched my chest. I put on a brave face, sure. I was rude and sassy because I needed my armor. I needed this information for Everett.

At the present moment, adrenaline doesn't shoot through my veins.

I'm forced to face my nightmares.

But I have to be brave, regardless of how much it hurts. To bear witness to the demise of these two people is what I've been waiting for my entire life. More so, now that I've learned that they had a hand in murdering my mom.

Because of him, her first and only days as my mom were a horrible experience. A deadly one. I don't know how she died, but it has to be his fault. He's definitely responsible for my grandparents' deaths.

Judgment day is here.

My body still shivers.

"Princess, look." Everett is as gentle as he's ever been, gripping my chin and tilting my face toward the windshield. "Sirens. They're coming. This part of our life will end tonight."

"Yeah." The lack of conviction in my voice reaches my ears.

Which means Everett definitely caught it too.

"They won't stand a chance in court." He tugs me onto his lap. The gold of his wedding band glimmers in the dim light, carrying promises. "The

evidence and your testimony will be irrefutable," he continues, stroking my cheek. "Their staff will be put on the stand too. They won't risk committing perjury. We have an airtight case regarding your abuse. Every connection I have, they're at work. They're going to keep them locked up for life. Do you hear me?"

I hear him. I feel him.

I should find comfort in our revenge. One day, I will.

Today, I'm struggling to catch my next breath.

"The jury will have no choice but to convict them."

While my mind registers what he's saying. My thoughts turn darker, more morbid.

Maybe it would've been for the best if I'd died with Mom. That I'd never had to suffer knowing the truth of what was done to her.

"Aurora." A shake of my head brings me back to the present. Everett's jaw is clenched tight, his nostrils flaring. "Enough of that."

"What did I do?" I fake innocence. I try to put on a smile.

"You're really asking me that?" He barely suppresses the aggressive energy vibrating from him. "I see you, in case you've forgotten that little fact. I see you're suffering. Your thoughts, they're as mine as the rest of you are. Talk to me."

"He could've left me there to die." My voice is small, my words rushed. "He could've let me stay there, next to her, wherever that was. Next to my mom. He should've."

"No." Everett kisses me like a man possessed. He crushes his mouth to mine as if he's in a war. His lips, his tongue, his teeth, they mark me. Reassure me. "*No*."

Every swipe of his tongue, every nip to my bottom lip, he's being violent about it. He's taking away some of my pain, replacing it with *him*.

"You weren't meant to die there." He swallows hard. "She wouldn't… Fuck."

There's no sound of sirens as the police cars pull up to the gates.

The arrest will come as a complete surprise to Winston and Molly. Everett's power and pull made one thing very clear—the Clarkes weren't getting a heads-up.

"Your mother would've wanted you to live." When he presses his lips to mine this time, he unleashes his feral growl. I taste it on my lips. The desperation from it seeps into my body. "And live *well*. Don't you ever

forget that. We're so close to the finish line, so no. You don't get to do that. You don't get to stop being my brat. My beautiful fighter. You just—wherever your soul goes, I'll find it. Every fucking time. I'll drag you back to me, no matter what. But please, believe in me. Believe in us. Just stay, dammit."

I'm grasping his cheeks. Clinging onto this wonderful man I never want to let go of. "Everett…"

A knock on the window cuts me off. "Mr. Alder, sir. Good evening."

"Give us a second," he barks. His driver nods, leaving the SUV to handle the cops. Then to me, Everett whispers, "Talk to me."

"Maybe if I knew why I got to live and she didn't…" I search Everett's eyes for anger, for hurt. "I should've died there with her."

"Don't you ever say that. Don't even think it." His gaze holds nothing but strength. Nothing but love. He's breaking inside, but he's always my rock. "What you need is closure. To put this nightmare behind you. And I swear on my life, Aurora, you'll have it."

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EVERETT

Years of plotting. Of waiting.

For over two decades, my anger's been simmering just under the surface.

The anticipation has almost eaten me alive.

The need to see justice being served has become a part of my personality. Of who I am.

Now I finally have it. The police force, the shouting, the handcuffs on every staff member is what I wanted.

And I feel like a fool.

Yes, the fire coursing through my body is precisely what I've been expecting.

The flames of righteousness are there.

The power that pushes my shoulders back and my chin up. That, too, has been a long time coming.

But, this, their demise, isn't my endgame after all.

Aurora is.

She was supposed to be one more casualty in this bitter war that's already taken everything from me.

She was supposed to be the enemy. A target to take down.

In retrospect, I see how wrong I was.

Even if she weren't Lotus's daughter, Aurora was always meant to be mine.

I think I knew it from the start. I know it now, looking down at her. Watching over her as the police raid unfolds inside the Clarkes' mansion.

Aurora is glued to my side, tucked under my arm, where she belongs.

She's shivering and restless, her gaze is frantic as she scans the main floor, searching for her father.

He isn't here. The coward isn't stupid enough to try to escape through the front door.

That would only end up with him getting shot, and like every textbook narcissist, Winston loves himself way too much to allow that to happen.

I'm not worried. They'll get to him soon enough.

After Aurora and I are done with them.

Which, if it were up to me, that would've happened minutes ago.

Except I'm here for Aurora. She asked me to stay a bit longer. For her heart to settle before she learns the details of the awful truth.

I get that.

I respect that. Her fears and concerns.

Unfortunately, I don't think waiting helps her.

Every *click* of handcuffs that echoes around us earns me another one of her gasps. Instead of being filled with a sense of victory, she's more terrified by the minute.

That's not right. That's fucking unacceptable.

No one will scare or terrorize her. No one.

"You have the right to remain silent." A blonde police officer drags one staff member past us. She's leading him out the front door while reading him his Miranda rights. "Anything you say—"

"I'm just the chef here!" His outrage is nothing but a whisper at my back.

Just the chef who witnessed the abuse of a minor since the day he started working here. Though I don't recognize him, I know he did.

Aurora told me about all of them.

"—can and will be used against you in a court of law," the officer continues.

Their footsteps fade in the background.

"Everett," Aurora rasps. "We can go now."

"You sure?" I brush a lock of her hair behind her ear.

She shivers as my knuckles trace along her soft skin.

“I am.” The bravery she finds within her damn near thaws my cold heart.

“Good girl.” With a hand to the small of her back, I jerk my chin toward the staircase. “After you.”

At the first step, Randy emerges out of nowhere. He’s one of the two detectives leading this case who I talked to first. His hand is on my shoulder.

Sweat beads along his brown hair from running around here. “Mr. Alder.”

I narrow my eyes at him.

“Apologies.” He removes his offending hand, rubbing the back of his neck.

More people are being escorted out. More Miranda rights read. More *I’m innocent*s.

“I was thinking it’d be better if I joined you two,” he offers. “The case is airtight as can be, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I understand.” On its own, my palm trails up Aurora’s back, closing around her collar. A reassuring gesture. I’ll keep my promise to her. No one but me will be there when she’s at her most vulnerable. “That’s why I’ll be there to supervise it. You aren’t allowed in that room with us until I say so.”

“Mr. Alder.” His hands rise, a pathetic attempt to appease me. “I’m only suggesting it for your own good.”

“Stay. Here.” I still don’t have all the answers. Aurora is still a mess. I don’t give a shit about him and his suggestions.

“Okay.” Something in my tone or my expression must come off as final. It makes him step back. “Call me when you’re done.”

Telling him I will is a waste of time.

Up the stairs we go.

The large double doors at the end of the hall are closed.

Closed, but not locked, as I realize when I push one of them open.

“I’ve got you,” I murmur to Aurora as we walk in there together. “Never forget that.”

“Yes, I—”

A phone crashes against the wall by Aurora’s ear. I’m quick to move her behind my back, standing guard between her and these two motherfuckers.

“Bitch.” Molly, the one who threw the phone at us, jumps from one of the armchairs by the window. In a pink sweatsuit and with wild hair, she

stomps on the floor like a petulant child. “I gave you everything. My best years. My sanity! God, you were insufferable. Always. And this is how you repay us?”

Before she gets any closer, Winston grabs her by the waist.

“Watch your fucking mouth,” he whispers, throwing her behind him. His evil blue gaze is trained on us while he talks to her. “Do not move, you hear me?”

“You gave me nothing.” Aurora wriggles out of my hold for all of a second.

My fingers clasp around her wrist, yanking her to my side. I’m ready to throw myself before her, if need be, but she needs this conversation.

She needs to show them she’s so much better than they are. So much braver.

“Nothing?” Winston roars.

His wife remains obedient, snarling like the monster she is.

“Nothing,” Aurora spits out, her voice shaking with either rage or fear. Maybe both.

“This *nothing* was far better than growing up in the streets, where your mother gave birth to you.” He’s talking about her and Lotus, about what he’d forced my sister to do. My fucking God. My mouth twitches. My murderous urges are hardly contained as is. “Better than starving to death. Or worse.”

“I would’ve been with her!” Aurora’s teeth are bare, and I see it now. It’s her anger spilling out of her.

Pride fills my chest at the sight. How she’s pulled herself together. How she won’t go down without a fight. It’s awe-inspiring. It also gets my dick hard.

“You tortured me.” The venomous words and the way she delivers them send another surge of pride through me. “You had something to do with my mother’s death. You’re the reason I’ll always be a product of rape.”

His mouth opens to cut her off mid-sentence. I take an intimidating step toward him. That silences him.

“Both of you.” When she lifts her left hand, her ring reflects the soft light in the room. The light dances on the walls as her hand quivers. As she expands her lungs to say her piece. “You wanna talk about what you’ve given me? To my family? Heartache. Trauma. Death. It’s all on you.”

Winston has the nerve to appear bored. He sighs, looking at me. “Is she done?”

I sure as fuck am. Done, as in done being polite. Done pretending to be civil.

Just because I won’t kill him, doesn’t mean I can’t hurt him in other ways.

He approached us while she talked and is so close now that one step is all it takes for me to reach him. Hand around his throat, I push him to the floor, going to my knees beside him.

“Leave him alone!” Molly screams, but is smart to stay in place.

I growl, squeezing his putrid breath out of him.

He claws at my hand.

It’s no use.

He and I both know it.

“Aurora,” I call her without looking away from her piece of shit father. “Come here.”

Her ballet flats are silent as she pads toward me. She rests her hand on my shoulder, careful as if she were handling a wild animal.

“Thank you.” Emotions thicken her voice.

I shake my head. “Winston here asked whether you were done or not.”

I might be her husband, but her jailer? No. Fuck that.

The reason I’m asking is for her. So that our enemies can see Aurora is a powerful woman, not my prisoner.

“I’m not.” The warmth of her envelops me once she kneels beside me. “Why did you let me live, Winston?” She chokes at the end of the sentence. “Why did you have to kill her? Why?”

I wrap my free arm around her waist.

Winston looks from her to me. Then at the closed doors. He’s listening to the commotion downstairs, assessing just how bad things are.

Very bad.

“We know you raped my sister. We aren’t here to pull a confession out of you.” I tighten my grip on him until his lips turn blue. “In addition to Lotus’s diaries, we have a court order to obtain your DNA and prove that you’re the father. We have Aurora’s testimonial about the years-long abuse. It’s just a matter of time until your staff cracks and cuts the deals I pre-approved today and rats on you. You’ll be put behind bars no matter what you say, so might as well tell the truth.”

“What—” The breath he’s been working so hard to take turns into a cough. The satisfying sound vibrates beneath my palm. “What’s in it for me?”

I pull his head up, only to slam it back down. His skull makes a nauseating sound as it connects with the floor.

“Asshole.” Aurora joins me, slapping him hard. Again. Again. “What’s in it for you? What’s. In. It. For. You?”

At this rate, she’s going to lose it altogether.

He’ll laugh when that happens. Nothing will please him more than Aurora breaking down.

“Shh.” I’m being uncharacteristically gentle, pressing her to me. Holding her, supporting her weight as she collapses into me, her breath hitched. “He can’t hurt you. He can’t and won’t hurt anyone anymore. You’re okay. You’re okay.”

“He won’t tell me.” Her voice is shrill, hands curled into fists. “He won’t.”

My lips brush against her temple. “He will.”

“Pathetic.” Winston’s bulging eyes lock on Aurora’s face. “Then again…”

“This is one sentence you won’t get to finish.” I bang his head on the floor again. A low *thud,* and he’s silenced. Aurora chuckles. I get off on that sound. “And to your question. What’s in it for Winston fucking Clarke?”

“Yes?”

Winston’s face is inches away from mine.

Me and the man who took so much from Aurora and me.

“For the right price, anyone’s up for sale.” I offer him a smirk, which I hope will terrorize him for the rest of his life. “You know better than most, I’m sure.”

“You’re going to pay me for my secrets?” Hope twinkles in his eyes. “Gonna cut me a deal?”

“No.” I’m more than happy to snuff out his hope. “What I will do is pay not one, not two, but ten inmates to become your new best friends in prison. By the first week, your asshole will stretch as wide as the Atlantic. Your organs will be irreparably damaged. No one’ll be there to stop them. Even the prison doctor will be on my payroll. Unless you answer Aurora’s questions.”

At his ashen cheeks, my smirk widens. “No matter what I’ll tell you, you’ll keep me safe?”

“I never said that.”

The prick scowls. “No deal.”

“Best I’m willing to offer is solitary confinement. For you and your wife.”

He’s earned this. His sanity will be stripped from him when he’s locked up by himself. With no one to talk to for years.

“Fine. Fine. We have a deal.” He slams his hand on the floor, tapping out. Defeated. Pathetic. He might be thinking about cutting his own deals behind our backs. I’d like to see him try. By the end of this, he’ll be broke. A nothing. “Lotus came to my house—”

I shake him, growling, “Look at Aurora when you’re talking to her.”

“She came to our home one night. It was a few months after I married Molly.” He’s wise to do as I say and look at her. Aurora presses her body against mine. “It was late. Dark. I hardly recognized her. Hardly saw she was holding a baby in her arms. She cradled you in so many dirty fabrics.”

Regret hits me, burning through my body.

We could’ve done more for my sister. Could’ve told her how loved she was every waking hour. Maybe then she would’ve believed us.

We failed her.

No use. No point in wallowing in self-deprecation and misery.

What’s done is done. Sadly.

Holding on to Aurora matters. It’s the only thing that matters. I won’t fail her.

“Then I realized she was carrying you. When she told me you were mine, I could tell she wasn’t lying.” His eyebrows scrunch at the pressure I’m putting on his throat. As much as I hate the idea of letting him live, I loosen my grip. “Lotus wasn’t like that. She was naïve and trusting. That was how she fell for someone like me. Why she was obsessed with me.”

“Careful,” I warn.

“Fine, fine. Let me just get it over with. During the Royalty meetings, she’d wait for me near the bathrooms. Every time I stepped out to take a call, she was there.” His shrug is pathetic. “She was too young. I wasn’t interested. But she kept insisting. It dragged on for a year before I snapped. Told her I’d be in one of the bathrooms at the mansion once the adults left. And from there…you know. Boys will be boys, and all that. Anyway—”

I let Aurora have that slap. It's mild compared to the hell I'm this close to unleashing on him.

"She wasn't lying. I matched our DNAs later, Aurora. However unnecessary it was. Though it wasn't why I kept you." The corners of his eyes crinkle. "My father married me off to Molly. Problem was, he didn't bother checking if she was able to bear children or not. She wasn't."

"It's not my fault," she cries.

"Shut up," I bark. Their marital problems are none of my concern. They're free to resolve them later, in the back of the police car.

"My inheritance depended on me having at least one kid. Taking you was the perfect solution," he continues. "On top of that, adopting an orphan would've done wonders for our image. The idea of selling her off as someone's wife was another plus. Perhaps to a senator or a high-ranking official. Maybe use her to run for governor one day, if I played my cards right."

I can't help it. I laugh. I laugh so fucking hard, because—seriously? I haven't taken him for being delusional. Abuser? Yes. Rapist and murderer, that too.

This is another level of unhinged.

"You don't think I could?"

"I think you're a piece of shit," Aurora growls at my side. Her fury is gorgeous. Blazing. Mine. "Finish the story, asshole."

He snarls at her. "She had no place in my future. She begged me to come with her to her parents, to help her make things right. *I won't press charges, just tell them and the rest of the Royalty that we were foolish. We made a mistake, and it wasn't a big deal. I can't bear the thought of Mom, Dad, and Everett being the center of a scandal*. That's what she asked of me. I lied to her and promised I'd help, inviting her inside to take a hot bath and have something to eat before we left. While she was in the bath, I snuck in behind her. I strangled her."

"You killed her here?" Aurora chokes on the words. Her hand claps over her mouth, her face turning green.

I'm equally repulsed by the idea, my stomach churning.

"Yes."

"Here?" She looks around the room, then back at him, her face twisted in pain. "Where I grew up? I walked on the—*God, fuck*—my feet touched the floor where my mom's body lay?"

“Again, yes.” No remorse. No sugarcoating his heinous crimes. “She handed you over to Molly, and I murdered her as soon as she had her back to us. I got rid of the body, hid you so your grandparents wouldn’t recognize you, and that was that.”

I’m not in control of myself. Of my fist, as it connects with his stomach over and over and over.

That was that.

That. Was. That.

He’s ruined five lives, and he has the audacity to say *That was that*?

“Everett.” Aurora jumps on me, hugging me from the side. Both her arms are wrapped around my shoulders, lending me the warmth I don’t deserve. “Everett, stop. I won’t let you go to prison for this. I won’t.”

That one small kiss to my cheek, and I can breathe again.

Sucking in air, I turn to look at her. Tears stream down her cheeks. Her pained gaze cuts me deep.

“We have our closure.” She strokes my stubbled jaw, her voice as unsteady as I feel. “It’s time for us to start healing. It’s time to move on.”

She’s right. So right that I bark for Randy to come.

Together, we watch him haul Winston and Molly out of the room, humiliated, pathetic, and *done*.

They’re done.

I can finally see my future, and it’s with this woman whose cheeks I’m cupping.

“Thank you,” she groans between one passionate kiss and another. “For finding me.”

“I’ll always find you.” I touch her everywhere my hands reach. The need to feel her beneath my fingertips is as urgent as a dead man’s last breath. “Wherever you go, wherever you are. I’ll always find you.”

“I believe you.” Pulling back, her forehead presses to mine. “I love you.”

“I love you too. With everything I have in me. Until my dying breath. You’re mine.”

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EPILOGUE

Everett

"Mommy, you're sooo pretty," Nia, our five-year-old, says, her voice full of awe.

"Thank you, baby." Aurora's arms are wedged between us.

My arms make sure she's as close as I can get her.

Still, she manages to crane her elegant neck at our daughter, offering her one of her warmest smiles.

Even my soul thaws when she aims it at me.

"Mom, please, you don't have to keep thanking her. She's been saying it over and over since we left the house," August pitches in.

At six years old, he's more sarcastic than I would've liked.

But not as sarcastic as *he* would've liked, I imagine. His lips twitch into a small smile as he helps his little sister throw the other end of the solar-powered fairy lights up and over my shoulders.

"August." I look down at him, biting back a smile of my own. I'm never really upset with our children. Impossible, when I love them so much it hurts. "Apologize to your sister."

"Fine, you're right. Mommy's always beautiful." He hugs Nia, offering her his half-assed apology. Together, the two of them avoid—barely—the

two white bouquets they left on the ground before the string lights mission started. “I’m sorry.”

“Aww,” Aurora whispers so only I can hear.

My beautiful bride rises onto her tiptoes.

I don’t wait for her to offer me any fucking thing. I lean in, capturing her mouth with mine.

Her red lipstick is smeared. Her gown is crumpled in my hands.

I’m grabbing her so tight, needing her so close, that the lace material of her corset is about to tear.

It will tear. Later, when we’re home. When we’re done with our *real* wedding, as we explained it to the kids.

That was my idea, by the way. Aurora has never gotten the ceremony that she deserves. I never had my family surrounding me like I do now, in this graveyard. With their tombstones at our feet.

Back then, our wedding was all wrong.

By the time my heart was in the right place and I wanted to make it right for her, the Clarkes’ trials started.

Then Aurora got pregnant the first and second time. Our entire focus was on our perfect children and us. Our family.

Together, we created two clever, gorgeous children. We’ve been wrapped up in them since.

Time flew, as it always does.

Now, we’re finally here.

Next to our family’s burial plot.

August, my best man, and I match in black tuxes.

Aurora is in an elegant white gown, her hair tumbling down her back.

Last but not least, Nia. My brilliant girl is wearing a glimmering blue dress that accentuates her blue eyes.

Speaking of ideas—being enveloped in fairy lights was hers. She’s obsessed with fairytales, with happy endings. With magic.

Can’t blame her for that.

I, too, believe in magic.

After all, that’s what brought her mom and me together.

No other way to explain how seeds of pain and violence have sprouted into a tree of love. Of life.

Of hope.

“Okay.” She pulls back, staring down at her big brother, even though he has a few inches on her. “You’re forgiven.”

“Oh my God.” Aurora hides her laugh by burying her face in my chest. The sound, like everything else about her, heals old wounds in me. “She’s a carbon copy of you.”

“Me?” I stroke the length of her back, moving my hand as much as our restraints allow.

“Yes, you.”

“No, Mrs. Alder.” A smirk tugs on my lips. “She definitely got it from you, brat.”

In the background, our kids are bickering again, their argument growing louder.

“You know what? I don’t need your forgiveness.” Our son huffs.

“You’re taking back your apology?” Nia gasps.

Yeah, that’s both of us all right.

Both Aurora and I turn to gaze at them.

“All I’m saying is…” There’s a crack in August’s severe expression. He’s loved Nia from the moment Aurora and I told him he was going to be a big brother. He was barely three months old, and he was all in. Parents know. “You weren’t wrong.”

“No, I was not.”

“What about you, husband?” Aurora tips her chin up, beautiful with the light glowing softly on her face. “Are you willing to admit that I wasn’t wrong?”

“Brat.” I put my mouth close to her ear. “You’re getting collared and punished tonight.”

“*The* collar?” Her skin heats, her cheek burning against mine.

God, I want her. I can’t wait to put the electro collar around her neck tonight, whether she’s asking for it or not.

My hands tense on her back at the idea. From the depraved thoughts of zapping her, standing above her as I watch her drop to her knees.

I can’t do that right now.

Reason one is that the kids are right here.

Reason two is that the collar is out of reach. We hide it in the closet in a locked safe, where August and Nia won’t find it.

Though there’s nothing wrong with her wearing one, the original one is bulky. The leather, the receiver. The whole thing stands out.

Our children would've asked questions. Ones we'd prefer to avoid.

Hence, the simple yet elegant stainless-steel eternity collar Aurora wears throughout the day.

She wears it while she's home with our kids, being the incredible mom she is. When she volunteers at the hospital. When we stay up late, and she crawls to me, seductive and gorgeous, begging for me to feed her.

Anyway.

Unless we're playing, she has this collar on.

"Yes." One kiss to her jaw has her shivering. She's pressing herself up against me. The love of my fucking life. "*The* collar."

She sucks in a breath. "This isn't a good idea tonight."

"Who said you had a choice?" I part my lips, my teeth grazing her neck in a silent threat.

"I don't think it's a good idea to shock me because…" Her pulse races against my mouth, her breathing shallow and quick.

I'm not a patient man. Even less so when my wife keeps things from me.

I bite her. Taste her skin.

"Pregnant." Aurora grasps the lapels of my tux. "I'm pregnant."

My eyes squeeze shut as emotions race through my body. These feelings, they'd been nothing but words before Aurora walked into my life.

Love.

Obsession.

Possessiveness.

An unrelenting need to keep her and my family safe no matter what.

The power of them slams into my chest like a wrecking ball.

"Daddy, are you okay?" Nia peeps, jumping so she can reach my hand and tap on it. "Daddy?"

"He's a little surprised, that's all." I feel Aurora's head turning to the side.

"He looks like he's about to fall on you." August is worried. I hear it in his voice. "Or something. Dad?"

"I fucking love you. Fuck, Aurora. You're fucking perfect," I murmur in her ear.

"I love you too." Her lips are soft on my throat.

"What's going on?" both our kids demand. Then, as always, they both scream, "Jinx!"

Fucking adorable. I hope they never change.

Before a second round of bickering starts, this time about who said it first, I stand up taller.

In the hush of the graveyard, I look at her, then at our kids. I swallow around the lump in my throat. Let the immense happiness show by offering them a faint smile. We'll bring up their future sibling later. At home. Once these feelings aren't as suffocating.

"Are you okay?" August's eyes narrow.

"I'm fine," I manage, thanks to Aurora's steady hands on my chest. She helps me breathe. "All right, you two. Why don't you recite what you practiced so well at home?"

In other words, our kids are going to officiate their parents.

This is a private ceremony for our family alone.

Stafford was the only one invited, but he couldn't join us.

After Winston and Molly were thrown behind bars for abusing a minor and the murder of my sister, Aurora's mother, he bought their business for cheap. Paid them thirty cents on the dollar since no one wanted anywhere near it.

Aurora was excited about it. She wasn't interested in their empire, their wealth.

Being my wife means she'll never want for anything.

Plus, I knew it was a good opportunity for Stafford to get richer and help more people in need.

And that's exactly what he's been doing.

In what little spare time he has, he's been a vital part of our family. He's the closest thing our kids have to an uncle.

He loves them, and they love him.

Hopefully, we'll get to be in his wedding soon.

"Okay." Nia nods. Both she and August pick their bouquets off the ground. They stare at each other, then at us. "What's the first line again?"

Aurora's lips curve up. "Dearly beloved."

"Dearly beloved." August opts to try to mimic the tone of my voice when I'm on a business call.

I'd laugh if these two weren't taking it so seriously. My precious kids.

"Granny, grandpa," Nia goes after him, referring to my parents.

Technically, they're their grandparents *and* great-grandparents. We explained to them how our family tree is built. When it comes to their titles,

though, we keep it short and to the point.

Same as we do with—

“Graunty Lotus.” Grandma-Auntie.

Aurora’s breath catches at the sound of her mother’s name on our son’s lips. My heart twitches as I cast my gaze over their tombstones.

They’re resting now, I’m sure of that.

They are. Together, Aurora and I ensured that justice was served.

“Very good,” I encourage them.

“Dad, you want to marry Mom again?” Our son recites what was easiest for both him and his sister to remember.

My eyes lock on Aurora’s. New tears swirl in hers, the blue in them reminding me of the sea in Capri, Italy. We spend two months of the year at our beach house in Europe, waking up to the bluest waters I’ve ever seen.

But they’ve got nothing on her. Nothing is as deep, as soulful, and perfect as my wife.

With her smeared lipstick and streaks of mascara running down her cheeks, she’s easily the most stunning woman in the world.

“I do.”

“And you, Mommy.” Nia tugs on the skirt of Aurora’s wedding gown, coaxing a sweet laugh out of her. “Do you want to? Marry Dad? Again?”

“I do,” she tells our kids.

She tells *me*.

I can’t take another second of not having my lips on hers. And though this kiss is a peck on the lips, as tame as possible compared to our first wedding, we still hear *ew* from below us.

Adorable. Sickeningly so.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

I’m theirs and they’re mine.

For the rest of our lives.

The End.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing spicy books about dirty talkers and the women who love them.

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